

# OUR ITALIAN FRONT

PAINTED BY  
MARTIN HARDIE  
DESCRIBED BY  
WARNER ALLEN





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## OUR ITALIAN FRONT

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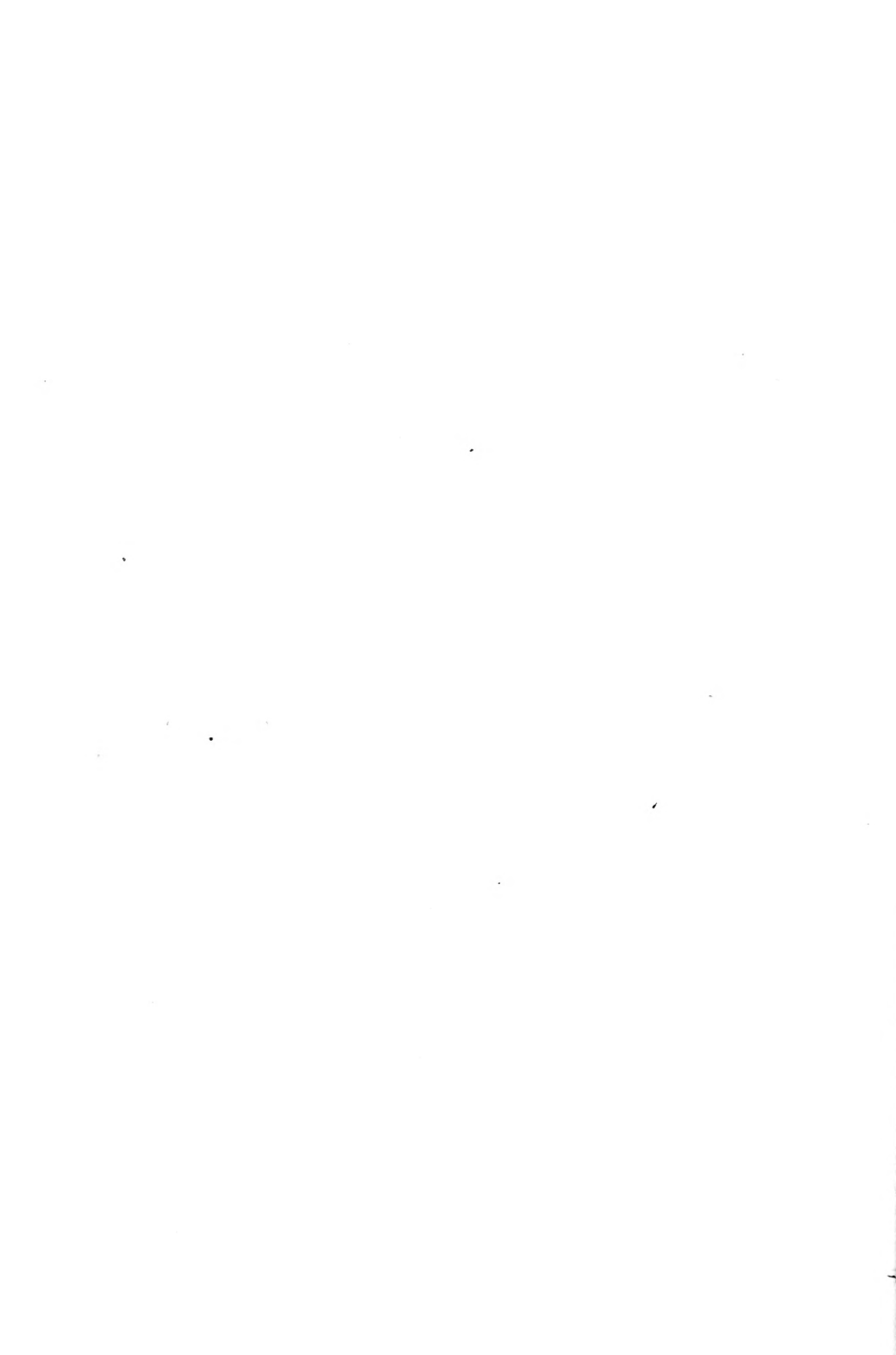
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GOING FORWARD INTO ACTION, SACILE.

At the end of October, 1918, after their victorious crossing of the Piave and the Monticano, British troops passed on through Sacile over hastily-made pontoon bridges.





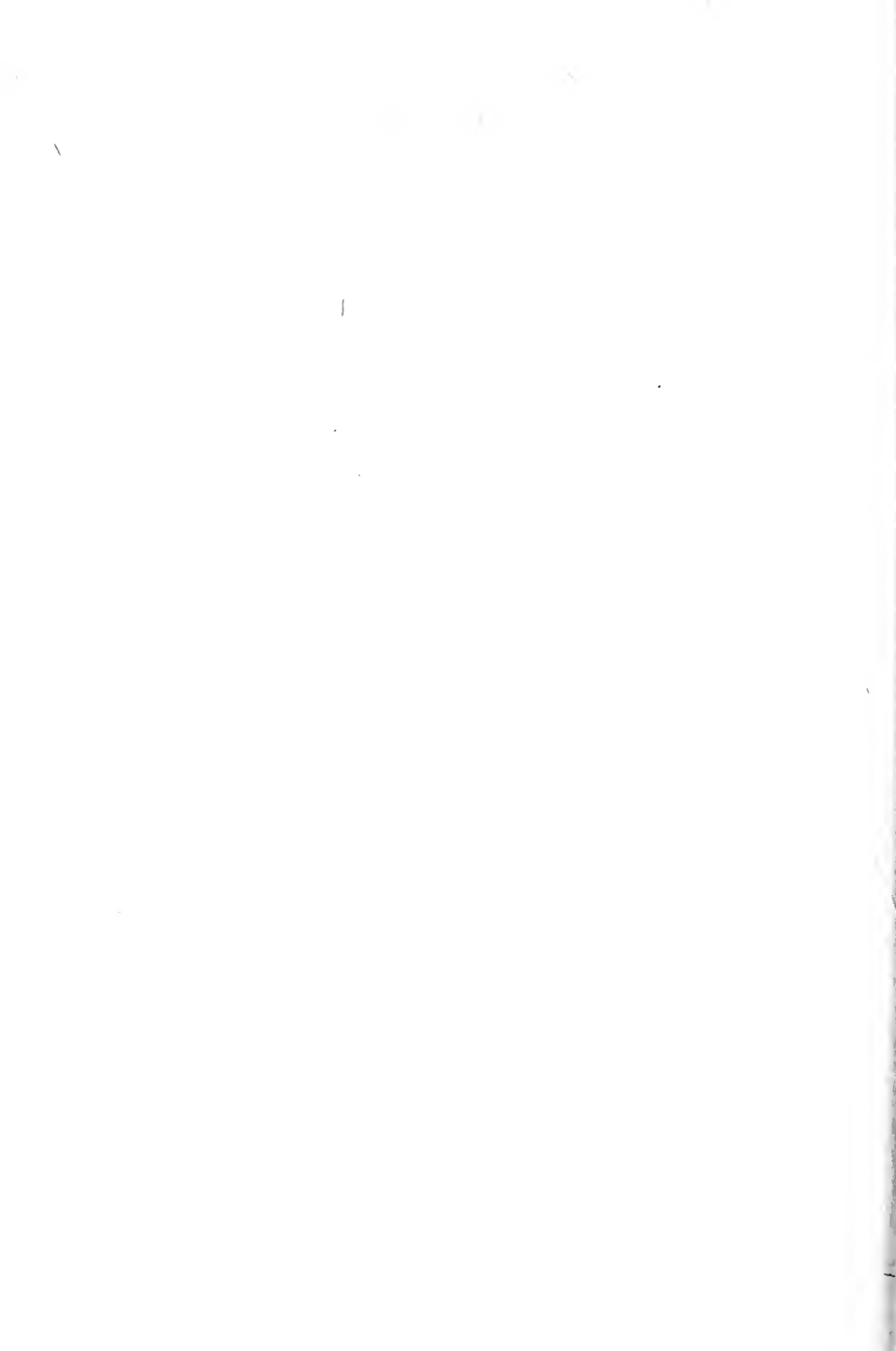
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A. & C. BLACK, LTD.  
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*Sketch Map at end of Volume.*

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## CHAPTER I.

### WITH THE BRITISH IN ITALY.

THOSE of us who on October 26th, 1917, watched the battle of the Malmaison came away with an intoxicating impression of victory. It was the day of the limited offensive, and no one foresaw the gigantic battles of 1918. The French at the Malmaison, with definite local objectives, captured 11,000 prisoners and 400 guns, establishing their mastery over the whole of the Chemin des Dames. Five months before they had taken two-thirds of the long steep hog's-back north of the Aisne, called by the French "the Ladies' Way," but repeated German attacks had weakened their hold and at the end of October they scarcely held a third of the disputed ridge. The battle of the Malmaison decided this long struggle. It gave to the French, who had, by capturing the forest of Pinon with its 300 guns, accomplished a feat regarded by the General

Staff as too ambitious to be included in the original objectives of the engagement, the undisputed mastery of the Ladies' Way.

Returning from this victory it was a rude shock and bitter disappointment to learn of the Caporetto disaster in Italy. The collapse of the Italian second army had left a great gap in our Allies' line, and through it the Austrians, aided by a number of German divisions, were pouring down from the mountains to the plain. The extent of the disaster was not long in doubt. In no uncertain terms the French General Staff declared that the Italians could make no stand until they reached the line of the Piave. There was much consultation of maps, and at first sight it seemed impossible that the combined German and Austrian forces could with a single blow have gained so vast an extent of ground. We were accustomed then on the French front to regard an advance of a few miles as the limit of success; in those days of partial offensives the idea of a "break through" had been relegated to the limbo of things impossible. It seemed inconceivable that the enemy could have swept over all the Italian fortified positions. Was there not at least the line of the Tagliamento



#### VOCEMOLA.

All those who spent any time at the Base in Italy will remember the long, ramshackle, wooden bridge that led to Vocemola across the wide bed of the Scrivia, a mile from Arquata. The shingly bed of the river, as it turns a corner at Vocemola into the mountains, is covered in parts with willowy shrubs.





before the Piave was reached? Those who knew, however, declared that the Italian army could not be rallied to check the enemy before the Piave, and that only with the instant aid of the Allies. For the first time there was a real break through on a fortified front, and, as events proved, the German Staff, which was directing the operations, was as surprised at its success as the Allies.

The map showed that the Piave line was in dangerous proximity to Venice. To the tragedy of defeat was added the terror that Venice with all its irreplaceable wealth of beauty and tradition might be taken and destroyed. For Italy the loss of Venice might have had a fatal moral effect. Not an Italian but regarded the Queen of the Adriatic as the most precious jewel of united Italy. An Italian officer said to me just before the Austrian offensive of June 1918, "If a shell or a bomb touches St. Mark's I have sworn to go on killing Austrians till I die. Whether it is peace or war I will murder every Austrian I can find until they shut me up or kill me."

Moreover it was not merely a question of aesthetics. Venice was the only port that the

Italians had in the Northern Adriatic to face Pola and Fiume. Its loss would have meant withdrawal from the greater part of the Adriatic.

As time went on and the Italian retreat continued past the Tagliamento towards the Piave, rumour became more and more pessimistic. There would be, it was whispered, no resistance before the Adige, the traditional line of defence in north Italy. Venice, Treviso, Padua, Vicenza and the richest plain in Europe were to be left to the mercy of the invader, and Verona with all its treasures of art would be in the forefront of the battle. Even this retreat, said the pessimist, would be insufficient. The Italian authorities, he declared, intended to fall back even further, to the line of the Po, where they would make a separate peace on any terms with a victorious enemy.

While rumour was hard at work painting misfortune in its blackest colours, the Allies were not inactive. In the past they had done little to assist Italy, and the Italians on their side had failed to realise that "La nostra guerra" was the same war as that which was being waged by the French, English, Belgians and Serbians. The enemy was enjoying to the full the advantage





#### THE WALLS OF VICENZA

These outer walls of Vicenza, unmentioned in the guide-books, would win more attention in a town **not** so famous for its Palladian architecture. They date from a time when the cities of the plain had to defend themselves against fierce and sudden attack : and, about 1000 A.D., Vicenza was furnished with walls and four gates, each surmounted by a massive watch-tower.





on which German military writers had always counted. The central empires formed a solid block with a single policy and a single command, opposing a body of allies only loosely united and without any common directing principle.

Italy's disaster served to remind her Allies that they were all engaged in the same war. At once France and Great Britain prepared to send an adequate force of veteran troops to re-establish the situation. The military authorities had at least foreseen the possibility of such a crisis, and the scheme for the transport of troops from France to Italy was ready. Within twenty-four hours of the decision taken by the French Government to send aid to Italy troop trains were starting from the Lyon Station in Paris conveying the first French reinforcements. The British also lost no time in dispatching men and it was decided that the Italian expeditionary force should consist of seven French and five British divisions, a force quite capable of dealing with the nine German divisions which had reinforced the Austrian army.

In the middle of November I received orders to join the British force in Italy, and on November 17th, 1917, left the Lyon Station with instructions

to report at British General Headquarters without delay. It was still doubtful whether the Italians would be able to stand on the Piave, and consequently the position of British G.H.Q. was hypothetical. The British authorities in Paris, however, believed that I should find General Sir Herbert Plumer and his Staff at Mantua.

The gathering of the nations against Germany had something of the universality of the Crusades. Nowhere was this general unity of purpose, if not of direction, more evident than in Italy. In peace time, there were always to be found in Italy travellers of many nations, but their diversity was concealed under the drab veil of civilian clothes. In time of war each nationality was marked with a distinctive uniform, and in every railway carriage there was as it were an epitome of the League against Barbarism. In the Mont Cenis train there were French, British, and Italian uniforms by the score; there was the khaki of the United States worn by a Red Cross mission, there were Belgian and Serbian officers and even a Japanese.

In one carriage was a British Captain fresh from the horrors of Ypres and happy to be in Italy, which for him was full of the memories

of fleeting holidays stolen from the cares of business life. At first he was obviously suspicious of the badgeless uniform then worn by a War Correspondent, but by a commonplace coincidence of travel he proved to be the brother of an old Oxford friend with whom once in undergraduate days I gained my first taste of the joys of Italy. Opposite him there was a British Major who had held appointments in every country in the world, a past expert in railways, motor cars, and the many mysterious arts which modern war has called into existence. Though he did not announce it to all the world, his mission in Italy was the organisation of camouflage, and he and his men in the coming months did much to teach the Italians how in plain warfare the enemy can best be deceived.

He had the manner of an old campaigner and his utter ignorance of the Italian language was impressive. At Milan, he created a great sensation by commandeering a post office truck and hurling all the sacks of mail on to the platform in order to convey his own kit to the Turin train. In vain the Italian officials protested, and accompanied the mad Englishman with a chorus of lamentations. Their relief was great

when they found that he did not intend to take the truck away with him, and they became quite friendly when he gave it back with a most impressive salute.

For five days and nearly as many nights we journeyed together, and the sense of movement was so sweet to him that it drowned all fatigue. A journey of a hundred miles in seventeen hours left him as fresh and cheerful as ever, with only one regret, a conscientious scruple that he was enjoying himself at the Government's expense, and was not really earning his Major's pay all the time that he was compelled to spend shivering in uncomfortable railway carriages.

France was represented by a Deputy, who had gained promotion from N.C.O. to Captain on active service. He was going to Italy on an important mission connected with the Red Cross. With him there was a little grey-bearded Chaplain who was travelling from Flanders where he had won great honour with his beloved *Fusiliers Marins*, the French Marines, to join a ship in the Mediterranean.

He had been out one night with a patrol in the debatable ground beyond the Martjevaart, and had been cut off by a German barrage. He





H.Q. OF A 15 CM. AUSTRIAN BATTERY  
NEAR CASA LA SAGA

After the defences on the bank of the river, this was the foremost enemy trench on the Piave near Palazzon. All along the trench, shells, clothing, and accoutrement were abandoned in confusion by the retreating enemy. Yet the day after the retreat, Italian peasants were collecting, not clothing, leather or arms, but firewood—a precious possession in northern Italy.





had hoped to be useful as a Red Cross man, but when the shells gradually advanced upon his party from the rear he found himself alone in a shell hole. The storm of shells passed and the Chaplain scrambled out of his shelter. His companions had disappeared, leaving him alone in a country of utter desolation. For four hours he wandered about trying to discover the direction of the French line. Once he thought he had found a French outpost and hailed it with joy. Then to his horror he heard sounds of guttural German and believed that his hour had come. However, determined to make a bold show, he advanced towards the enemy armed only with his stick and making, as he said, as much noise as half a dozen men in falling out of one shell hole into another. There came a noise of hurried splashing as of men taking to their heels, and he realised to his great relief that the nervous German patrol had fled. He stumbled on till by little less than a miracle he returned to the French lines after crossing that ditch of hell, the Yser Canal, on the trunk of a fallen tree.

By a strategic move at Modane, we had all taken places in a compartment of the carriage which was carrying many millions of French

francs to pay the French *poilus* in Italy. Those millions were under the guard of several paymasters, and night and day a sentinel stood in the corridor watching over them with, as one of them confessed, an unloaded rifle. Their presence had several advantages. On the one hand, it assured us that the carriage would go through to Milan and that there would be no changing. On the other hand, no profane civilian was allowed to travel in the carriage. Civilian traveling had been utterly disorganised and trains were so few and far between that they were all filled to overflowing. The corridors of the rest of the train were packed with a solid mass of humanity, while our carriage had still a vacant space or two.

At Turin we lost sight of the Chaplain. He had found an old friend in the person of the Bishop of Namur, who had received permission from the Germans, after repeated demands, to go to Rome and protest to the Pope against the treatment of his clergy and flock. Here for a time the carriage was invaded by a crowd of civilians who crushed themselves into the corridor and waited patiently for the train to start. "You must forgive us, Signori," said a pretty

girl to the foreign officers, "if our trains do not give you a better welcome. It is really not our fault."

There was much chattering, and the train stood fast for hours as if it would never move. Then there came Carabinieri who swept the crowd away from the neighbourhood of the sacred French millions. Without a word of complaint all the passengers bundled out with babies, parcels and shapeless packages back to the platform. But still the train did not go on. Pazienza ! Pazienza !

At last after much whistling it drew out. The Torinesi on the bridges gave cheers for the Allies. At the last moment two Italian officers got into our compartment. They were wearing cavalry uniform. Their faces were pale and drawn and their green-grey uniforms showed signs of hard usage : yet they had not lost a whit of the cavalry smartness and were full of life and spirits. In Italian fashion they saluted and introduced themselves by name to the foreign officers. They had been on the Piave and their regiment had helped to cover the retreat from the Tagliamento. They spoke sadly but bravely of the terrible blow that had befallen Italy.

The colossal waste of labour and material, the miles of magnificent roads and splendidly engineered trenches, the guns and ammunition which had gone to swell the resources of the enemy were indeed matter for lamentation but not for despair.

They had been carrying out the cavalryman's noblest duty, sacrificing themselves for the sake of the retreating infantry. They had retreated and advanced, advanced and retreated, until they had foundered their horses. They had fought by day and night, losing heavily, until at last the enemy came to a standstill. "Had it not been for the circumstances," said one of them, "we should have enjoyed it. It was our first chance of fighting on horseback. The trouble was that we had nothing to oppose to the Austrian machine guns mounted on motor bicycles, and they caused a great many casualties."

The sacrifices of the cavalry were not in vain; behind them two regiments took the place of an army and dug themselves in along the bank of the Piave. The enemy was not in sufficient strength to break through. Surprised by the extent of his victory he had not enough reserves at hand to exploit his success to the utmost.



From Milan to Mantua the journey was tedious, and our arrival at Mantua was more than depressing. The town was packed with British troops, but not a sign of headquarters. Thanks to great luck we found shelter in a garret for the night, and after a hasty meal set out to consult the A.P.M. of the town. He proved to be a friend in need. General Plumer and his staff were to arrive at Legnago on the following day, and he offered to give us a lift there in his car. The Seventh Division was on its way to Legnago and he was responsible for the route arrangements. The camouflage Major and I were only too thankful to accept the A.P.M.'s offer, even though it meant stranding the greater part of our luggage indefinitely in Mantua.

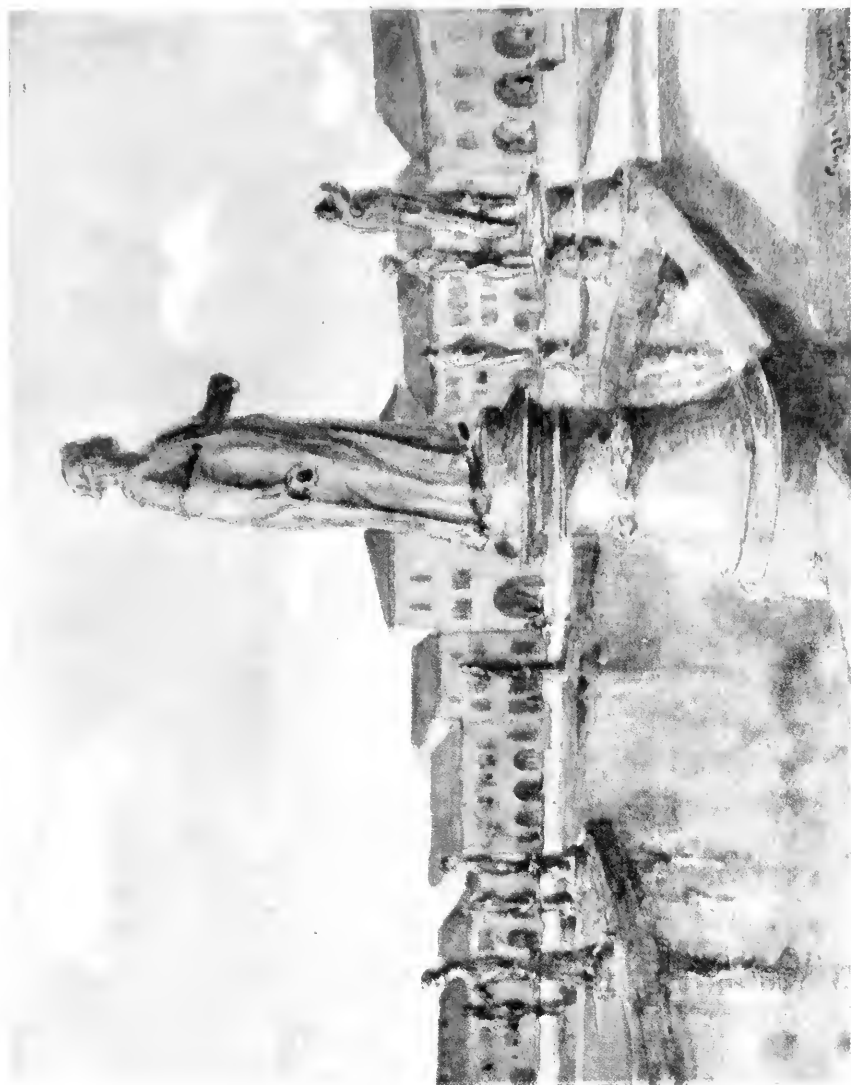
Mantua is a beautiful town full of historical and artistic interest, but it has one of the vilest climates in Italy. Surrounded by marshes it lives through autumn, winter and spring in a perpetual mist which drenches everything. It was certainly not a place in which to station British troops for any length of time. The people of Mantua rained flowers on the Seventh Division. For the British it was almost a triumphal march. Through the grey streets with

their mediaeval colonnades the khaki column marched as only veteran soldiers march. Every man was decorated with flowers, which formed a ridiculous contrast to that grim pomp of war distinctive of the British army. The sight of our men gave fresh confidence to every one. It was a tragic contrast when they got out of the town into the plain and began to march forward past the remnants of the Second Italian army that was straggling back to be reformed. On the one side perfect discipline, clean uniforms and polished accoutrements, and a ripple in the lines like the bending of well-tempered steel: on the other side a disorderly rabble of tattered panic-stricken soldiers with no more cohesion than a flock of sheep. The military authorities had been dealing severely with the officers and men responsible for the disaster, and in every town one might see lists of traitors or mutineers condemned to be shot in the back. There was fear in the Italian ranks. The British officers were marching beside their men, keeping an eye on their comfort and behaviour. There was not an Italian officer marching with the rabble. Every officer had commandeered some form of vehicle, it might be a farm cart, it might be an



#### PIAZZA VITTORIO EMANUELE, PADUA

The fine trees in this spacious Piazza are surrounded by water and a promenade adorned with a double series of 82 statues. Beyond them, in the drawing, one notes the typical arcades below the houses. In the S.E. corner of this piazza is the Church of S. Giustina, a bare building of noble and imposing proportions.





antiquated cab or a decrepit barouche, all of them drawn by half-starved horses. It was a funeral procession, and some Italians declared that it marked the end of united Italy. Happily they were wrong.

We reached Legnago before the Staff, which only arrived late in the afternoon. When it did arrive we learnt that it was only provisionally at Legnago, and for the time being there was nothing for us to do. Our troops, as they were arriving, were preparing to hold a line in the Euganean Hills behind Padua, in case the enemy should break through on the Piave. There would be no work for a War Correspondent until the Expeditionary Force had been concentrated and fully organised.

A modern scientific army is a factory of war. No conception of the enormous task involved in the transference of the British Expeditionary Force to Italy can be formed unless one imagines the transport of a gigantic factory employing hundreds of thousands of men several hundred miles. All the machinery of the army—and with modern artillery, ammunition and other impedimenta it is far more cumbrous than the machinery of a factory employing as many hands

as there are soldiers in the army—had to be conveyed across France and the Alps by railway. The only lines available were the Mont Cenis and the Riviera Coast line, the latter of which was for a great part of its length a single line. Simultaneously, the French were bringing seven divisions into Italy, and they took as their line of communication the Mont Cenis route, leaving the British to do as best they could with the Riviera line, which had never been designed for such heavy traffic.

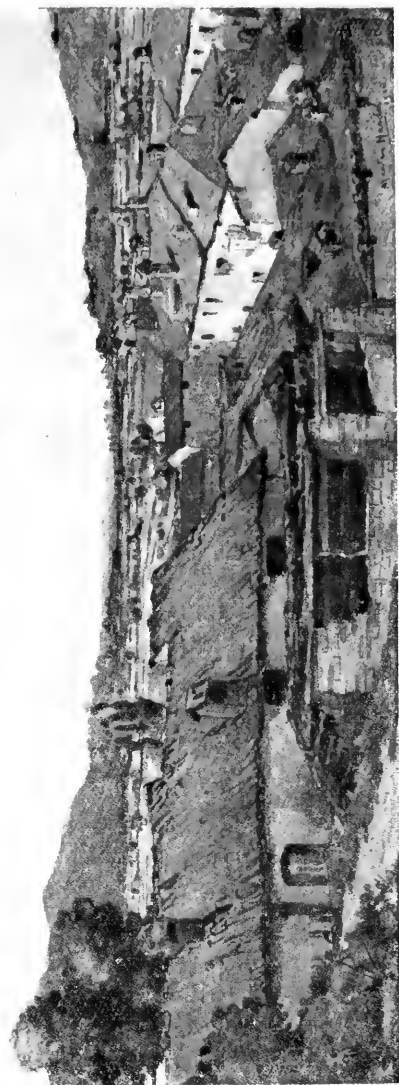
The strain on the railways and the test to which the organising capacity of the General Staff was submitted were very great, and the vastness of the accomplishment could only be appreciated after travelling across the whole breadth of north Italy from the Mediterranean coast to Milan and Verona, and thence to Venice. It was scarcely an exaggeration to say that there was not a village in all that great stretch of country that had not played a part in the transport and concentration of the French and British Expeditionary Forces. So far as concerned the British, the centre and heart of the whole complicated organisation lay in Arquata Scrivia, an Italian village in a mountain ravine on the





#### EVENING SHADOWS, ARQUATA

So far as concerned the British Expeditionary Force, the centre and heart of the whole complicated organisation lay in Arquata Scrivia. (See pp. 16-21.) Arquata lies in the shadow of a hill, with a ruined tower on its summit. From pathways on its slope one looks over red roofs to where the hills join the great plain of Northern Italy.





line between Genoa and Milan. The first time I visited Arquata Scrivia, only a few weeks after the departure of the British Expeditionary Force for Italy, there were already many British troops in the village, and ordered camps of tents had sprung up all over the fields, but there was still little to suggest the vital importance of the tremendous labour that was being performed there. There was no bustle or disorder. Every one was working and working effectively, but three years' experience of war had reduced everything to a system and there was no hurry or confusion, because each man knew exactly what he had to do and how to do it with the least waste of energy.

British soldiers were to be seen walking in cheerful disciplined groups along the tortuous streets talking to the inhabitants in a strange jargon of French and English, with a generous addition of Italian terminations. The military police seemed to maintain order mainly by moral influence, though more than one Italian bullock driver was amazed to find that he was expected for the first time in his life to obey the rule of the road, of the existence of which he was only dimly conscious before the war.

In the beginning of the war, the scenes in which the uniforms of our Island and the uniforms of the Continent were mingled as they had never been for a century, seemed strange beyond all imagining. Yet customs and environment were far less startlingly different than those which surrounded the British Expeditionary Force in Italy. French, Belgians, and British had fought with and against one another since ages beyond memory. Never before had a British army been able to boast an Italian campaign. In the main square of Arquata there was sitting that morning a picturesque old tinker, *magnano* the Italians call him. The greater part of his stock in trade consisted of simple tools as rude as those that the Romans used. A patched pair of bellows and a little heap of charcoal provided the heat required, and his white beard blew this way and that while he chattered and bargained with wrinkled old women and laughing dark-eyed girls. He was sitting at the edge of a delicate Renaissance fountain. In the background, there rose a precipitous hill crowned by a shapeless block of masonry once a castle, and over all was the blue Italian sky. From time to time, a group of khaki-clad soldiers walking with measured



#### THE PIAZZA OUTSIDE BASE H.Q.

From the main street of Arquata one turned, beside a noble Renaissance fountain, into this piazza, a pleasant spot when the evening shadows began to fall. (See p. 18.) In the building with the large gate the M.F.O. and R.T.O. at one time had their billet. Base H.Q., a large, well-proportioned building—once a summer palace—stood higher on the right.







steps to their work would pause and join the little crowd which the women's bright kerchiefs made gay with colour. Signs would take the place of words. There would be a burst of laughter and with a wave of their hands the soldiers would go their way. In Arquata there was no hurry, but not a man had any time to waste.

The Base station was crammed with men and trains; to all appearances it was a chaos, but I soon had evidence that order prevailed. The camouflage Major was looking for a Corporal and seven men and he remarked with a groan when he saw the crowds round the station, "One might as well look for a needle in a hay stack." Yet it took him less than five minutes to find his Corporal and the detachment.

The stores dump was admirably tidy. Heterogeneous objects of every kind were stacked on a disused railway siding as carefully as if they had all been set out by an expert window dresser. Barbed wire, wheel barrows, trench tools, rolls of felt, wire netting, timber in every shape and form, weird apparatus required for aerial photography, in fact every conceivable kind of material was stored so as to be easily and immediately

available. Italians and British worked side by side unloading trucks, and stately Thorneycroft lorries carried off everything destined for the dumps outside the station. The officers directing the work were still far from satisfied with the results attained. Italian railways have always been run on a happy-go-lucky system and whole trains were missing, lost no one knew where. However, energy and skill made up for all these defects of the Italian railways, and one felt quite sorry that the transport officers would not have the good luck to see the full fruits of their labours. While far behind the line they were struggling desperately to multiply the transport powers of the Italian railways, their efforts were being transmuted into solid fact several hundred miles away where the British divisions under General Plumer were advancing to take their place in the line. It was due very largely to the untiring toil of these men that the British army was fully up to time. Not a promise was made that was not completely fulfilled, and the men who had been fighting practically without rest for a whole year in Flanders, and had lately earned fresh laurels at Messines and Paschendael, marched up in



#### THE MAIN STREET, ARQUATA

Tens of thousands of British soldiers have wandered up and down this street. (See p. 18.) On the right was the fountain where Italian maidens gossiped over their pails of water; on the left, just out of the picture, the hut where the A.P.M. grilled beneath his iron roof; and, opposite the trees, the piazza which led to Base H.Q.







splendid form with their complete equipment ready at the appointed date.

In 1918 I passed through Arquata several times, and each time I found surprising evidence of its growth and improved organisation. The original village had almost disappeared beneath colossal piles of material. To a great extent Italian shop signs had disappeared and English notices had taken their place. Traffic regulations were obeyed by the natives, who were fast becoming rich, as if they had always known the rule of the road. There was abundance of everything that the army could need. Trains were no longer hours late, and illusive trucks no longer disappeared in the mysterious way which had once rejoiced the heart of the Italian railway officials.

The splendid discipline and condition of our men filled the Italians with admiration. An Italian officer said to me, "The tenth legion that was never elated by victory since it knew that it had deserved it and never cast down by defeat since it knew that it had done everything that soldiers could do, has risen from the grave and returned to Italy." The British army had come to help Italy in the hour of need as one

friend aids another who is sore beset. From the highest to the lowest ranks this idea prevailed, and the strength of the Allied armies in Italy lay in their common purpose and friendship. This point of view was fully realised by the Italian people. Seldom has a foreign army been so warmly welcomed as the Italians welcomed our men. There may have been a few exceptions, due partly to German propaganda, partly to language difficulties. For our German adversaries had done their utmost to persuade the Italians that Great Britain was the cause of the prolongation of the war, and it is hard for simple people who have no ideas of history or geography to tell what is true or false in international politics. Again it is hard for people to arrive at an understanding, however great their goodwill, if they have no common language. As a rule, however, our troops were everywhere cheered and decorated with flowers. The Italians showed their pleasure at the sight of British khaki in the most practical of ways. Often at the beginning they refused to accept payment from British troops, and as a general rule they carefully abstained from putting up prices against us.

It is the little common-place kindnesses 'that



#### THE STREET OF THE ARCHES, ARQUATA

A side street that led to Base H.Q. With its arched gate at each end and the warm colouring of its buildings, it was almost Moorish in its aspect—and also in its odours. But, as someone has said, "The East begins in Italy."





are the true test of a people's goodwill. Many Italian barbers refused to accept payment from British soldiers. At Pavia, the camouflage Major tried to buy a rug, and an old lady volunteered to help him. She was determined that he should have it as cheaply as possible, and the result of her protestations and the shop-keeper's goodwill, was that the rug eventually changed hands at something under cost price.

Enemy propaganda in Genoa was used in an unexpected way. The walls were covered with copies of manifestos issued by the enemy in French and Belgian towns, with their thin disguise of robbery and murder under the veil of martial law, so that every one could understand the real meaning of German tyranny. A great crowd paraded through the streets demanding that all German property in the town should be confiscated and handed over to the refugees driven from their homes by the enemy advance to the Piave.

It was one of the arguments of German propaganda, that the French and British had come to Italy to live on the Italians without the smallest intention of ever taking their place in the fighting line. This argument was soon obsolete, since,

at the beginning of December, the British took over the Montello sector on the Piave, while the French held the line at Monte Tomba. The Montello, a long low-lying hill, is bounded on the north by the river of which the meandering course runs at this point roughly east, bending to the south at Falze. It flows some 800 feet below the highest point of the Montello, which rises 1220 feet above sea level. Its bed is very broad, as is usual with such mountain rivers. When water is let loose in the peaks above, they suddenly swell and the broad stretches of shingle between their channels are covered with a torrent of foam. The river rushes away down to the Adriatic with terrific force, and then when its supplies above dry up sinks back as suddenly as it rose, to its usual placid course.

When I first saw the Piave at the end of November, 1917, it was in one of its calmest moods. There had been practically no rain in northern Italy that autumn, and the season had been dryer than any within the memory of man. Its grey-blue water glided down peacefully between the broad shoals which, with their yellow pebbles, seemed the most important part of the stream that is often 2000 yards across, counting





#### CLEARING THE RUINS OF CIANO CHURCH

Many of the churches in the war zone of the Piave are ruined beyond all hope of repair. The church of Ciano, on the Montello, was in an exposed spot, always open to the enemy's fire.





shoals and channels together. It appeared far too tranquil and gentle to be a military barrier checking a barbarian on-rush on the fairest country in Europe. From a great semi-circle of rugged heights that frown down on the Lombard and Venetian plains, it comes into the plain through a gorge hewn out almost as abruptly as the famous Brèche de Roland in the Pyrenees which, story says, the Paladin hacked out with his sword Durandal in the hour of his sorest need. From these wild cliffs the Piave passes into pleasant hilly country, and of these hills which stand out as a bulwark before the great Alps the Montello is the most smiling. From the Montello it goes down to the great fertile plain, where some 20 miles further south Venice watched the invader advance without fear, mindful of dangers more menacing braved in the past.

In the background the wild summits, many of which are crowned with snow, seemed aloof from all things human, from peace and war alike. In the plain, all things spoke of long peace and prosperity. White villages with graceful towers were scattered close to one another in a proximity which betokened the richness of the soil. It was new ground, unfought over during our generation ;

though in the past, when warfare did not mean complete obliteration, it was one of the greatest battlefields in the world. It was impossible to realise that the enemy was lurking in those bright houses which even down to the bank of the Piave were still intact, and that, for the sake of right and civilisation, scientific warfare must lay waste the fair prospect.

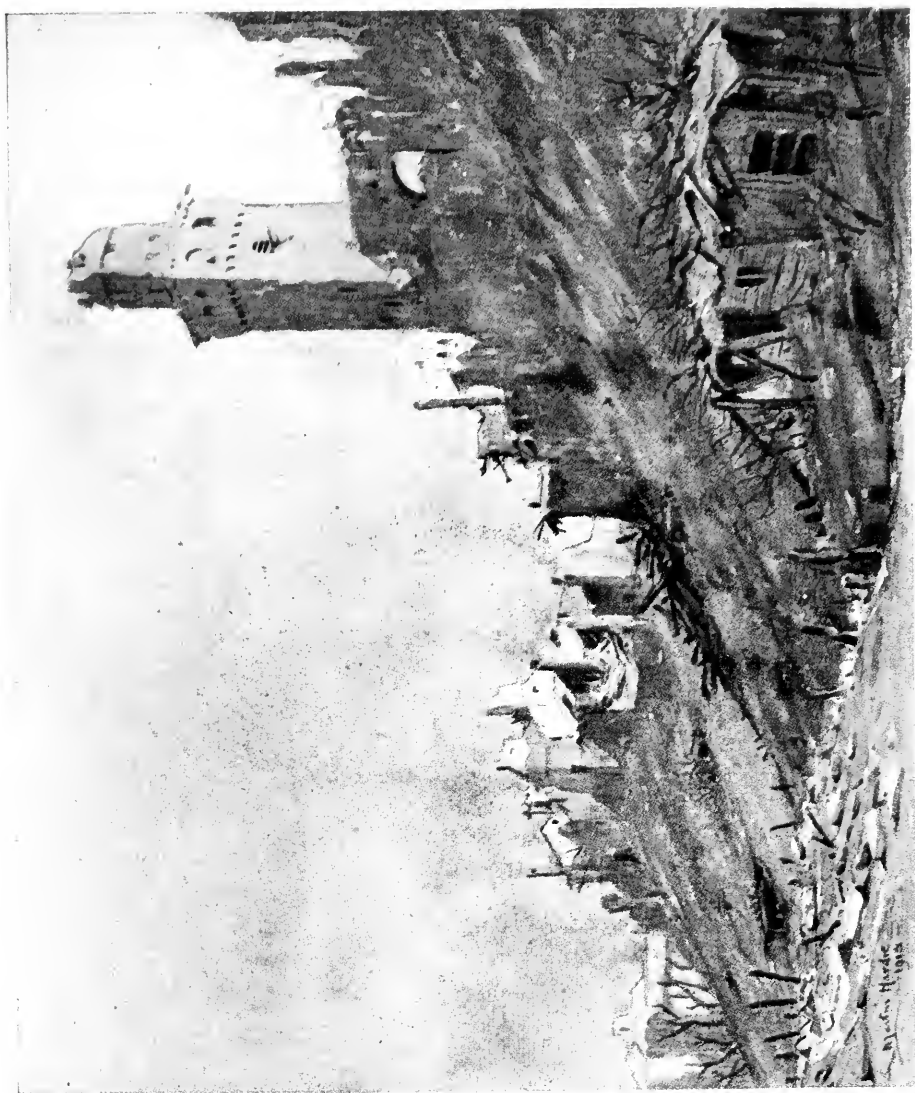
Putting aside the outer appearance of smiling peace, one soon learnt that from the military point of view the land was a land of observation posts. From their position in the mountains, the enemy commanded views far away into the heart of our lines. For miles one drove in full view of observers posted on the heights, and it was difficult to believe that the children playing in the villages and the peasants ploughing behind eight huge grey oxen, which turned up with difficulty the heavy soil, were far beyond the enemy's reach. It was hard at first to realise the weakness of such mountain observation. On a clear day the summit of the mountain seems only a mile or two away. One sees a patch of snow on its peak no larger than a man's hand and quite forgets that that patch is a great snow-field hundreds of feet across. In one village



ENEMY DUG-OUTS ON THE SLOPE OF  
SAN SALVATORE DI SUSEGANA

San Salvatore itself, as is shown by two other drawings, must have been an unhealthy spot to live in. This was proved also by the fact that the slope on the further side from the British and Italian line was honey-combed with dug-outs, each with its placard "Kaverne, No. —." The whole of this slope and the river-bed beyond were pitted with shell-holes.





1945  
H. H. H. H.



behind our line a mountain top in enemy hands commanded every street, and I could not rid myself of the impression that the enemy was quietly watching the busy activity of our men and abiding his time before he cut it short with a storm of shells. The peak seemed only a mile away and one could have sworn that one could distinguish boulders and little snow patches on its summit. It was only when I saw its foot that I realised how erroneous these impressions were. From a hill above the village, I discovered there was a wide valley between us and the foot of the mountain. Across the valley rose spurs and bastions jutting out from beneath the peak itself and covering square miles of ground. Then far away beyond the valley and the spurs came the peak itself. It must have been 15 miles or more away as the crow flies, and at such a distance even the best of German glasses could not distinguish detail. Observation was all the more difficult since the angle formed by the line of vision with the object observed was very acute.

From the Montello one could see in the clear air such villages as Farra and Pieve di Soligo nestling below the mountains near the cleft through which the Soligo flows down to the

Piave as though they were only a mile or so away, though they were really six or seven miles distant. Opposite the Montello, the enemy had a valuable position in the hill of San Daniele, crowned with woods broken by the broad scar of a quarry, whence he had views along the river valley in both directions, to the Vidor Bridge on the west and to the Susegana railway bridge on the south. There was no other crossing between these two bridges, which were ten miles apart and had of course been destroyed.

No greater contrast for the troops who had so long been fighting in the unlovely mud of Flanders could be imagined than the scenes in which they now found themselves. On the Montello mud was rare, and the rich red soil needed no revetting to hold up the trench side. Instead of flat fields and a few rows of poplar trees, there were extensive views bounded only by the mountains.

The Montello itself is a natural bastion advanced from the heights of the Alps into the plain. Seen from Montebelluna, it rises like a whale's back, and in winter it is brown with the brown of a Surrey heath. Its colour is due partly to the rich brown of the naked earth, and



#### CAVE DWELLINGS ON THE MONTELLO

The Montello, a ridge overlooking the Piave, rises like a whale's back, and its rich red soil is brown with the brown of a Surrey heath. It is formed of a series of rounded mounds, with curious circular depressions like the devil's punch-bowl in miniature. Many of these were burrowed with dug-outs that looked like ancient cave-dwellings. (See pp. 28-31.)







partly to the withered leaves still clinging to the scrub oak that covers the greater part of it. The oak and an occasional acacia take the place of the fir trees of more northern hills, and at a distance the ridge recalls Hind Head. It is formed of a series of rounded mounds and a curious feature of its formation is a number of circular depressions like the devil's punch bowl in miniature. Some of them are so perfectly round that they seem to have been described with a compass, and appear artificial rather than natural. It seems that they are due to the movement of a glacier which once covered the Montello and ground out these excavations by its pressure on the great boulders beneath it. On the side of these little punch bowls, and between them, are to be found small vineyards. In November all the hill was sprinkled with white farms and cottages that had not as yet suffered from the war. Peasant life continued to a very short distance from the line, and work went on within sight of the enemy. The newly laid barbed wire passed through fields that had been cultivated up to a few days before, and near a trench I saw a big heap of pumpkins left by their owner when the Italian soldiers turned him out of his house.

The Montello is seamed with a wonderful series of parallel roads. Of these roads there are no less than twenty-one, and their existence in so small a space seemed a mystery. It is said that the Italian authorities once prepared an afforestation scheme which provided for the replanting of the Montello with trees, and, with a view to carrying this out, built these absolutely straight and parallel roads. When they had built the roads, typically enough they gave up the scheme, and there the roads stayed of no practical use to any one. When the Piave however became a front these roads proved invaluable. The slopes of the Montello are very steep, and the gradients of these roads are considerable, but they are all practicable for a motor car, though not for large motor lorries. An enterprising Subaltern tried to get a convoy of three-ton lorries to the top of the hill and the result of his efforts was the ditching of nine of them in a row. The surface of the roads was hard on the tyres, as it generally consisted of lumps of friable stone quarried near by, unbroken and merely thrown one beside the other, but the result was a roadway that deteriorated but very little despite considerable traffic.



#### A CASUALTY ON THE MONTELLO

The interior of a church used as a casualty station. Of all the churches in the war zone on both sides of the Piave few were left as anything but a mere shell.





The Montello slopes steeply down to the river and is well adapted for defence. The banks of the Piave are high and abrupt, and beyond them our outposts held positions right out in the bed of the river on the shoals. The trenches built by the Italians were deep and well constructed, and the whole position was very strong from a defensive point of view. So long as the enemy could be held further west, where an advance from the mountains would threaten all the communications on the Piave line, the Montello could only be attacked with any hope of success after heavy artillery preparation.

For the first few weeks that our men were in the line the enemy guns shewed little activity. The enemy was lying low and only became excited when an inquisitive aeroplane approached his lines. For an hour or so I watched a British observation plane with its protecting battle plane observing the enemy positions. As soon as it passed a certain line the anti-aircraft guns spoke out and stained the blue sky with black shrapnel clouds. The enemy's shooting was quite exceptionally bad, and not a shot came anywhere near its target, though the airman was flying

very low. The Austrian's best effort was a "dud" which fell not far from us.

During December the cold in Italy was intense, but our men thoroughly enjoyed the change from the eternal mud and perpetual battle of Flanders. Despite the frost the sun shone often enough, and soldiers who for months had had no view except that of the enemy's parapet, rejoiced in the outlook across the fertile plains to the mountains. There was much work to be done, and British and Italian worked side by side to improve a naturally strong position. There was plenty of good cover, and the circular depressions with which the hills were pitted were easily converted into strong defensive positions. They afforded ideal protection, since their sides were steep and the soil lent itself admirably to tunnelling. The initiative of our troops was tested by the repeated attempts of raiding parties across the Piave. It is not an easy river to ford as several of its channels are deep and swift, and swimming was no pleasant or easy matter in that icy weather. The result of these raids was not only the collection of important information concerning the enemy's position, but also a detailed survey of the course of the



river with all possible crossing points. The enemy's lines lay back from the river, and his outposts gave little trouble as a general rule to our raiding parties, who succeeded in using ferry boats without attracting the enemy's attention. The bed of the river is continually changing, but the survey carried out by the British proved extremely valuable during the Austrian offensive, when the enemy succeeded in reaching the right bank of the river.

Some information as to the arrival of our troops in line seems to have reached the enemy, as just before they took over the Montello sector, five enemy captive balloons suddenly made their appearance in the opposing lines for the first time. No attempt, however, was made to interfere with our men, and they relieved the Italian troops in the sector without any interruption on the part of the enemy artillery. The French on their way up to Monte Tomba had to deplore the loss of a very distinguished officer, Colonel Beau, who was killed by a stray shell. Throughout the war he had been in charge of personnel at the French General Staff, and his knowledge of the career and ability of French officers was unrivalled. Fatigued by his exhausting duties,

he had been despatched to Italy with a view to giving him a well earned rest, and it was a cruel chance that he should have been the first victim of Austrian shells in the French Expeditionary Force.

The difficult business of relieving the Italian troops almost under the eyes of the enemy was accomplished with remarkable skill. Though thousands of men and large numbers of guns had to pass along the roads of the plain in either direction, there was no confusion or blocking of traffic. Even the cumbrous civilian traffic continued on most of the roads despite troop movements. Nothing is more difficult to regulate than the bullock waggons which swerve slowly and portentously from one side of the road to the other, and no power on earth can make bullocks move quickly out of the way of a motor lorry. Some of these animals are of gigantic size, with a magnificent span of horns almost equal to that of the Tuscan buffalo. Moreover, the Italian peasant is wont to drive in reckless fashion a half broken horse or mule, and thereby to multiply the road problem a thousandfold. Against these difficulties was to be set the splendid network of roads with which the plains

of north Italy were provided. The surface of the main highways held up marvellously despite the great weight of traffic. The Italian system of road making proved equal to the occasion. Practically all the inhabitants of the villages on the road, men, women and children, turned out with spades and shovelled stones on the roadway wherever it was worn. With the aid of a primitive watering cart, or it might be only with buckets and old petrol tins, they sprinkled the stones with water and then left it to passing cars and lorries to roll them in. The favourite water cart consisted of a barrel with a short hose pipe sticking out behind. It was drawn by a donkey, and the pipe behind was wagged desperately to and fro by small urchins who seemed to be hanging on to the tail of some misshapen, prehistoric animal. Fortunately for the tyres, the stones in this part of the world are almost always rounded and were crushed into the road surface without causing too many punctures.

The secondary roads were as a rule as good as the main highways so far as concerned the surface. They were, however, distinctly dangerous, for they have many curves and almost always

a very deep ditch on either side, while they are narrow, with just room for two lorries to pass. The skill of the British lorry drivers, however, was equal to every emergency, and accidents were very rare, though the secondary roads were largely used. It was a great advantage that in this part of the plain the village streets are less narrow and tortuous than they are near Mantua and Verona. Nothing more picturesque could be imagined than these latter villages through which our men passed on their way to the front, with their streets that turn in every direction, and in which the houses are so close that one can almost stretch one's arms from one side of the street to the other, but from the point of view of modern war and motor traffic they are quite impossible. Their full beauty is only realised by the weary motorist at night when he has entered the ancient village or town by a broad main road and has to seek for its continuation through a labyrinth of tiny alleys with not a soul about to guide him. Such "bottle necks" are prone to disorganise all the traffic, but fortunately the Italian authorities had wherever possible constructed roads right round outside the town.



THE RUINS OF SAN SALVATORE DI  
SUSEGANA

Another aspect of San Salvatore, showing the débris of  
what was once a beautiful palace.







In the British zone all disorder had disappeared in a very short space of time. Military policemen, all experts in traffic questions, reinforced the Italian carabinieri, and in some places additional aid was given by French gendarmes. The three nationalities worked together excellently. By the use of alternative routes for ascending and descending traffic and by attention to detail—a single lorry badly placed may stop a whole column—it was insured that the minimum of time should be wasted on the road.

The actual operation of taking over was by no means spectacular. There were no speeches or formalities, and everything went on in darkness amid a silence of conspirators. The one thing desired was to conceal from the enemy the fact that anything unusual was going on, since the moment of the relief is full of opportunities for enemy shells. Officers had been up before to learn all the details of the sector, and in the trenches the lines of men passed one another in silence. A few Italians remained behind after the bulk of their troops had departed to throw light on any point that might still be doubtful, but the whole business of the relief had been pre-arranged, and every British soldier went to

his appointed post almost as certainly as if he had been going into a familiar sector in Flanders.

In the second week in December the British sector began to wake into activity. Everywhere on the front, whether in France or Italy, it was always the same thing. Our men refused to give the enemy any peace, and however quiet the sector might have been in the past, it inevitably became active when held by British troops. Just before the British took over the Montello, an officer of my acquaintance thought he would like to picnic on the banks of the Piave, and he took his car right down to the Italian front line and then proceeded to eat his lunch on the pebbly beach in front of the trenches and in full view of the enemy. Such tricks were no longer to be played on an enemy who found the British artillery was perpetually annoying him. At first the Austrian gunners had tried to keep their position hidden, but eventually they started a heavy bombardment of the lines of communication and our batteries at once replied, giving them at least as good as they gave.

The Austrian artillery included a number of high velocity guns which were extremely dis-

agreeable, since their shells arrived and burst without giving any warning. The speed of the projectile was greater than that of sound, so that the whining noise of its approach was only heard after the shell had landed and exploded. As a matter of fact, the effects of high velocity shells are rather moral than material, since it is only by a direct hit that they really do much damage. The speed of the shell is so great that it drives its way deep into the ground before it explodes, with the result that all its splinters fly skywards and do no harm in the immediate neighbourhood. A friend of mine had a particularly unpleasant billet at Montebelluna, in a small house by the railway crossing. The enemy was within easy field gun range, and that level crossing was certain to be his target. One day a high velocity shell fell in his garden about three yards from the wall of the hut. Two soldiers were working in the garden, which was a very small one, rolling up camouflage material. The concussion knocked both of them down without hurting them, and the displacement of the air removed a few tiles from the roof, but otherwise nobody was a penny the worse. There was not a scar on the walls of the house, though it was only

three yards from the handsome hole in the ground which was the shell's sole accomplishment.

Throughout the winter, thick mists were prevalent on the north Italian plain, mists so thick that they rivalled a London fog. Then suddenly the weather would clear. The highest peaks would come out of the clouds and the fresh snow that spread down to the foothills above the plain would gradually withdraw to the high mountains, melted by the sun. Then the atmosphere would be very transparent and observation good. The enemy possessed some excellent observation posts opposite the Montello.

Among others, almost in face of Nervesa there was an enormous white building which had been a convent. It rose on a hill on the other side of the Piave, and from it the enemy saw over the low hills beyond the Montello to a depth of several miles into our lines. There were many rumours about the building. It was said to have been the Crown Prince's headquarters, though I do not know if there is any evidence that the German Crown Prince was ever on the Italian front. It was undoubtedly the headquarters of some division or corps despite its exposed position. Through the glasses every



#### THE RUINS OF NERVESA

The Nervesa position, at the eastern end of the Montello, was of special importance, since at this point the Piave narrows down to a ford. It took the villagers a long time to realise that their homes were in the firing line, but things got too hot for them when they had to dodge machine-gun bullets in the narrow village streets. There was little left of their homes at the end of 1918 but portions of the outer walls. (See p. 41.)







detail of the spot was clearly distinguishable, and I watched an enemy sentry moving to and fro. He disappeared soon, however, when a British shell went, with a cloud of smoke and dust, through the roof of the building. The British gunners kept a very close eye on that conspicuous target, and were only too glad for an excuse of shelling it, since the infantry down in Nervesa had been considerably worried by the enemy guns.

The Nervesa position was important, since at this point the Piave narrows down to a ford. It took a long time for the villagers to realise that their homes were in the firing line. At last they evacuated the place, but they used to come back during the day and remove their goods. However, things got too hot for them when they had to dodge machine gun bullets in the narrow village streets.

It was not till nearly Christmas time that the two divisions of the eleventh corps began to arrive near the fighting line. I accompanied a battalion of the Royal Warwicks in its march through the back areas not far from Padua. The Warwicks were a little puzzled with the tranquillity of Italy, but they were convinced

that they would soon see hard fighting, for it was not for nothing, they said, that they had earned the title of a fighting battalion. They had been on the Somme, Arras was to them a familiar haunt, and they had been suddenly plunged from the Ypres sector into southern France on their way to Italy.

They spoke of the joys of the Menin road in language that was lurid and picturesque. A Quartermaster Sergeant told me gruesome tales of ration carrying along that road when the enemy was firing all the time and the mules had to be got through at any cost. It was useless to stop if shells began bursting on the road ahead, as the enemy barrage would certainly move on, and the only hope was to press on as hard as possible along the flat bankless road without even a hedge to give a delusive semblance of cover.

Suddenly, almost without warning, the battalion found itself spirited away from the grisly Flander's battlefield to a land of sunshine and smiling towns. "We had a beautiful five days' train journey, and it was not an hour too long." Thus an officer, in civilian life an architect, who before the war was wont to travel

in the fastest international expresses, and even so to grumble at their slowness and the waste of time. The Riviera coast filled the men with rapture, the oranges on the trees, the olive covered hills and the blue Mediterranean—the sight of famous towns that they had never hoped to see! Just before evening, the officers told them that they were going to pass through Monte Carlo and they swarmed on to the roofs of the trucks and on the footboards that they might not lose a detail of the Principality of Monaco. “The best thing the war has given us,” said an N.C.O. with an air of finality.

The Commanding Officer was very young, under thirty. Keen eyed, clear headed, and prematurely wise, he meted out paternal justice to his men, ever mindful of the spirit of the regulations. There were little things that were eloquent, even to a stranger, of the spirit of his command. The battalion possessed a shibboleth. Officers and men alike used commonly the very excellent word “Periculous,” derived presumably from the Italian *pericoloso*, and meaning dangerous. A Sergeant explained to me its origin and purport: “It is the C.O.’s very own concoction, I believe,” he said, “he was out with

another officer in Flanders when a big shell burst close to him. 'I call this very periculous,' he said, all on the spur of the moment. Not that he minded at all, for he was always very cool, but he had hit on a good word and we all thought it was a good word, and now we all use it."

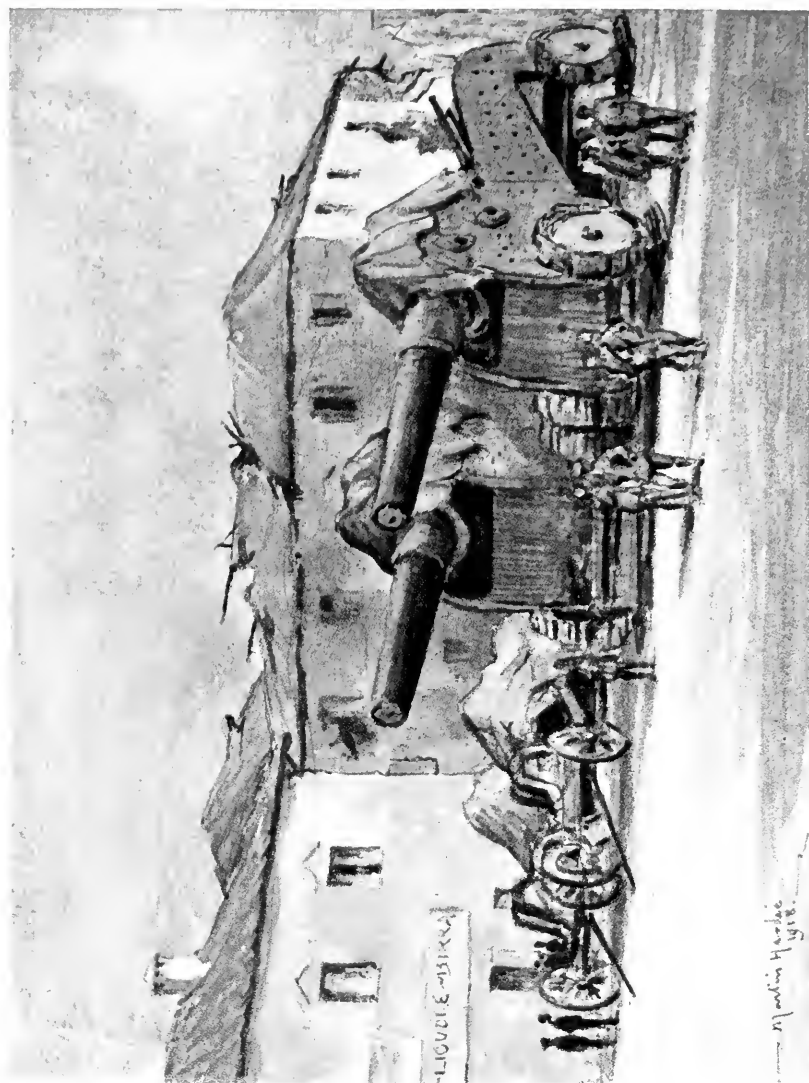
The battalion certainly found moving on from one billet to another in the snowy weather a rather periculous business. The evening before everything had seemed plain sailing. The battalion was not moving into one of the districts that it had reconnoitred for billets, but by a stroke of luck one of its officers had lunched with an Italian division and had there heard of marvellous billets in the very area into which they were to move, capable of giving shelter to the whole battalion and all its impedimenta. There are to be found in the Venetian plain, large houses and estates belonging to wealthy landowners, and hundreds or even thousands of men can be lodged in the huge silk granaries.

Unhappily the night before the move it began to snow hard, and in the morning there was an inch or two of snow covering treacherously a layer of ice that had frozen before the fall. The battalion left its old billets with undisguised



# HEAVY GUNS IN A VILLAGE AT THE FRONT

These heavy guns, parked in a village at the time of the Push, seemed to dwarf the neighbouring houses.







regret. The officers had been billeted in a house belonging to an old lady with two pretty nieces, who almost wept when they saw their guests depart. Chaperoned by their aunt they had taken part in a dinner and extemporary dance given in their honour. Signs and goodwill had overcome the language difficulty.

The moving of many men over roads is a complicated business and everything had been arranged so that the traffic might be distributed over the various routes. As a result of the bad weather every one started less cheerfully than usual, but after a few minutes marching the men recovered their spirits, and startled the natives with the variety of their whistling repertory. The lorry drivers had the worse time of it. The roads were so dangerous that they were bound to be behind time. A three-ton lorry when it begins to side-slip on a slippery road is an awe-inspiring monster. As soon as it is out of control, it plunges broad-side on in the most unexpected directions, sweeping everything before it. There is in Victor's Hugo's *Quatre-Vingt-Treize* a very famous account of a gun broken loose on board ship during a storm, and everything that he said about that gun might be said with equal

justice about a lorry that has, as a result of the road surface, turned itself into a more terrible version of the car of Juggernaut. But with it all the British driver remained the master of his machine, and eventually the lorries reached their destination without a single casualty, and not much behind time.

I had gone forward with the billeting officer and the interpreter in my car, and what with taking wrong turns and getting stuck in a field that snow camouflage had disguised as a road, we took an hour and a half to cover twenty miles. The billeting officer received a rude shock on his arrival. He learnt from an Italian officer that the famous billets were some way further on, so far that he was advised to take a carriage rather than go there on foot. Two dilapidated "rickshaws," as the Quartermaster Sergeant picturesquely called them, put in an appearance. Each was drawn by a frisky and half broken mule and driven by a sleepy looking Italian soldier. In these vehicles, the billeting officer and the interpreter disappeared. "A very periculous adventure," said the Quartermaster Sergeant. They were spilled in the snowy ditches two or three times, but eventually they reached the promised

billets which proved, if not ideal, at least adequate quarters in which to spend Christmas.

The British army carried with it into Italy the British tradition of Christmas. Distance and transport difficulties had deprived our men of many of the little luxuries which in France gave them a remembrance of home, and made the trenches more endurable. Necessities placed a heavy strain on all the available railway lines, and the postal service inevitably suffered. The greatest hardship to which the British Expeditionary Force was submitted when it first reached Italy, was the delay in the arrival of letters and parcels from home, but as time went on the organisation was improved, and after Christmas time, mails from Great Britain began to arrive more punctually. When letters were delayed, all those more bulky comforts which are eaten, drunk or smoked were necessarily held up, and it seemed that the army would have to depend on its own ingenuity to provide it with its Christmas dinner, though at the last moment the army mail sprang a pleasant surprise on everybody.

There were however certain elements of the Christmas feast in which north Italy was rich, and which it liberally provided for its guests.

There were turkeys, geese, guinea fowl and poultry generally galore. On Christmas eve I saw a mule-drawn mess cart upset into a deep ditch with a terrific gobbling and cackling. It was loaded with crates of geese and turkeys, and the driver's solicitude for his passengers' welfare was almost touching.

The towns behind the lines received the visit of countless officers and quartermaster sergeants seeking to find the Italian substitutes for their traditional Christmas fare. There were picturesque scenes in the market places of Padua and Vicenza and the surrounding villages, and the khaki uniforms seemed to blend quite naturally with the grey colonnades and time eaten walls of the ancient towns. Invaluable were the men who had some smattering of Italian, but even without a common language chaffering and bargaining went on merrily. One sergeant told me that he had found a slight knowledge of Latin invaluable in his dealings with the peasants. One officer took twenty minutes to explain that he wanted a box of coloured chalks for purposes connected with Christmas decoration, and in the end he found what he wanted.



#### IN THE AERODROME, VICENZA

A study of a "Camel," that did good service in Italy, lying outside the hangar. This was the "Camel" used by Mr. Sydney Carline, some of whose paintings of air fighting on the Italian Front are in the Imperial War Museum.



Cardine's ~~the~~ Canal. N. side 1918  
1918





The canteens had not been fully organised, and had only received a limited quantity of goods that were distributed with strict impartiality, care being taken that the men nearest to the enemy should get the first choice. Everyone was occupied with the problem of the plum pudding and it seemed likely that some strange forms of this delicacy would be eaten on Christmas day. Currants and raisins were unobtainable, but sultanas could presumably take their place, and there was no shortage of candied peel and spices. Whisky was almost unknown and beer very scarce. The British soldier missed his beer, and had not learnt to appreciate the excellent light Verona and Piemontese wines. The Italian Macedonia cigarettes suited the English taste better than the stronger French Caporal and Maryland, and in many places all the available stocks had been bought up, though English cigarettes were beginning to arrive in the canteens. Despite the enormous demand, prices rose only moderately, and the resources of the north Italian plain seemed inexhaustible.

Everybody had made up their minds to have a really happy Christmas. The British officers had done everything in their power to give

their men that break in the monotony of war which they had earned over and over again, and which was invaluable for maintaining the moral of the soldier. "It is a *bon* war in Italy," was the general judgment on the new front.

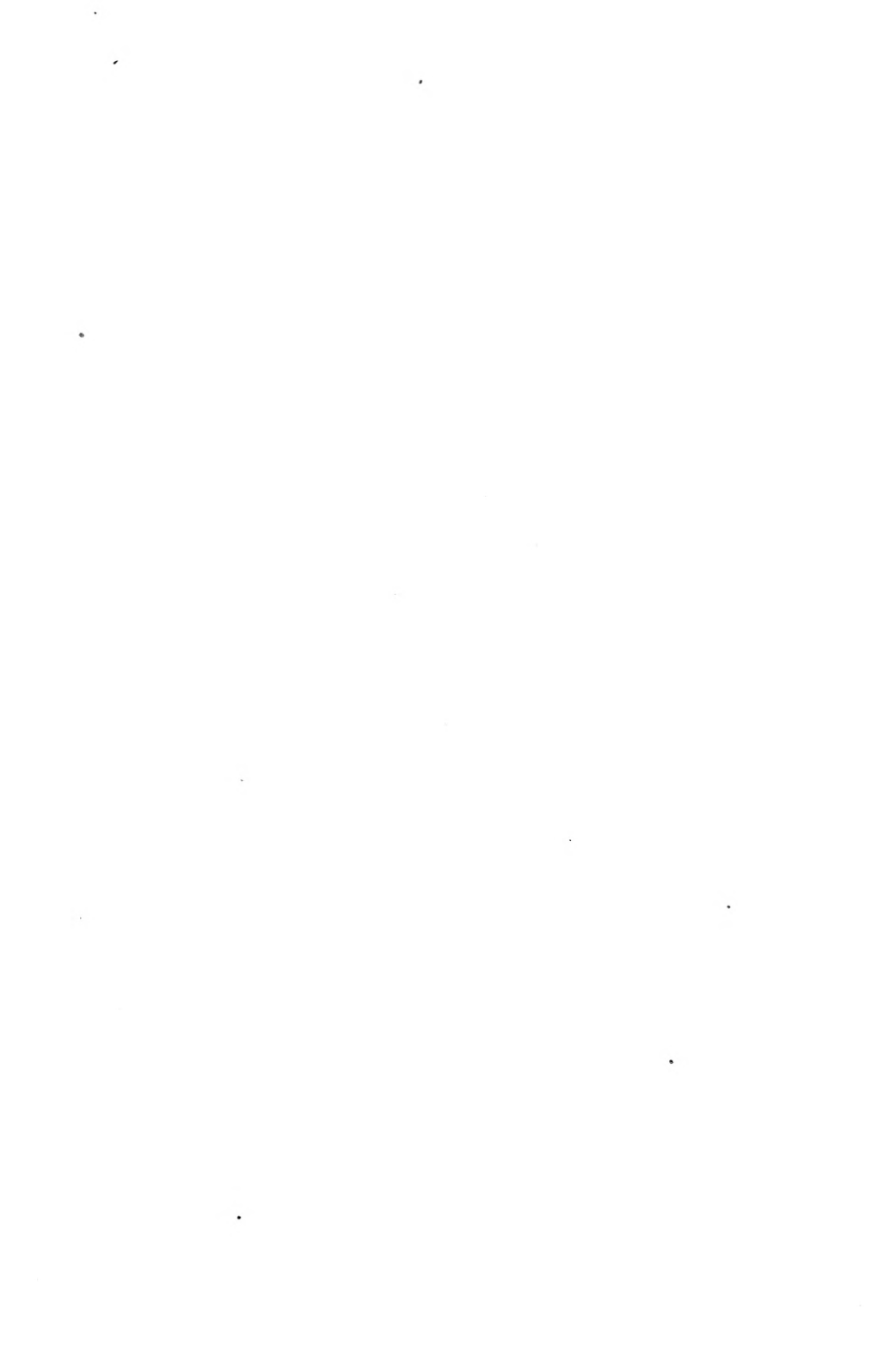
On Christmas day, the army discovered that the powers that ruled its transport and supplies had played the part of Father Christmas as though they had no other concern in the world but merriment and jollity. They kept their secret almost to the last moment and there was an added charm of surprise in their benevolence. On Christmas Eve it seemed that our men in Italy would be deprived of many little comforts to which they were accustomed in France at that season. That night the official Father Christmas got to work and performed miracles with the railways. Nothing was forgotten, and by Christmas morning plum pudding had arrived in tons, half a pound for every man. There were English cigarettes and tobacco, whisky for the officers' mess, rum for the men, and, above all things, a huge Christmas mail. To make things quite complete, a Quartermaster Sergeant of the battalion with which I spent this Christmas

had discovered a brewery in Padua possessing a sufficiency of light draught beer.

It was that battalion of the Warwicks which I have already mentioned. The festivities began with a football match, in which unfortunately the officers who were my hosts were soundly beaten by the officers of another regiment. The game was played in a field surrounded with vineyards on the banks of the grey-blue Brenta. The C.O. kept goal, and the Second-in-Command, who, alas, was doomed some five months later to fall in France, wrought considerable destruction on the persons of the opposing team.

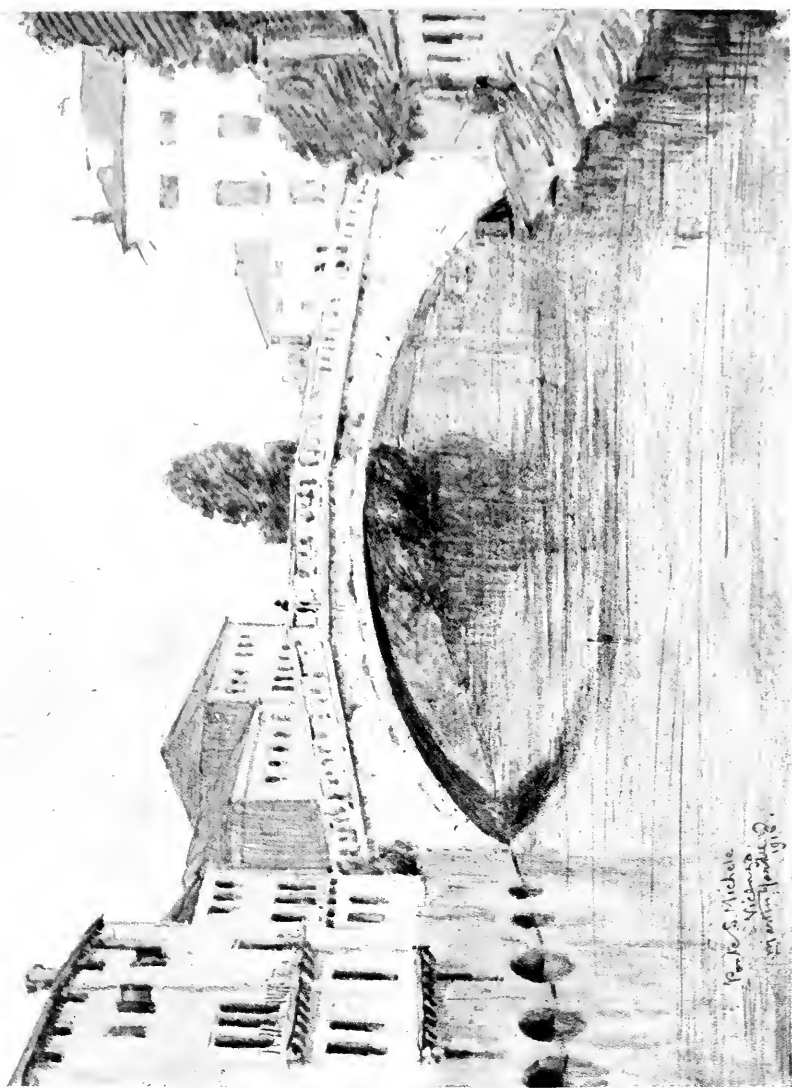
After the game, the players and the lookers-on, who, as the wind blowing from the mountains was bitter cold, had kept themselves warm by singing, cheering and stamping, returned to billets for the opening of the Christmas mail. It was a magnificent mail. Everyone seemed to have ten or twelve letters. There was a silence and groups gathered close round the flickering candle to read the news from home. Often that evening a man would drop out for a moment from the boisterous festivities and bend again over the sheets of paper that called up Christmas far away in England.

At five o'clock the Company dinners began, and each company was visited by the C.O. and Second-in-Command. Two companies dined in an enormous loft or granary. It was a sight to be remembered. The granary was cut breast high with great worm-eaten beams, centuries old, and on every beam stood rows of bare candles. There were candles lower down stuck on helmets and ammunition boxes, and the whole building was wrapped in a flickering, religious light. There were only two tables, for wood is scarce in the district, and the men made themselves comfortable on the brick floor with the ease of old campaigners. Light and shadow played on the dim khaki, and threw into relief smiling, clear cut faces exuberant with health. There was no confusion. Files of men poured continuously along the narrow alleys between the beams with their mess tins to the table where the cooks, for whom Christmas day had been no holiday, were wrestling with the turkeys and severing with jack knives their reluctant joints. With faces bathed in sweat, they toiled on interminably, carving the roast beef and distributing the pudding. There was beer for every one,



#### PONTE S. MICHELE, VICENZA

Vicenza, to which neighbourhood G.H.Q. moved after leaving Padua, is built on both sides of the Bacchiglione. Among the many bridges spanning the river, the Ponte S. Michele is perhaps finest in its architectural design.



Porto S. Michele  
Michele  
1918





dessert of apples and oranges, cigarettes, and finally rum punch.

When the more substantial part of the meal had been disposed of, the Sergeant-Major's whistle sounded, and the songs which had burst out from all parts of the granary, and which, if not always melodious, were always cheerful, died away. The Commanding Officer swung himself on a table, and, as he stood there erect, looking over the men who had so often gone with him over the top on the terrible fields of Flanders, there came into my mind Kipling's verse : " He trod the ling like a buck in the spring, and looked like a lance in rest." What he had to say to the men was very simple and matter of fact. There were no heroics, only thanks for loyalty and devotion to duty during the last twelve months, and the words called up the shell swept Menin road and the merciless Ypres salient. " I prophesied last year," said the C.O., " that we should not spend this Christmas in France, and my words have come true, though not quite in the way I meant them. I am still optimistic, and believe that we shall keep next Christmas in England. In any case, I am sure that we are all agreed that this is the best Christmas that we

have had in the war. A month's rest is something the battalion is not accustomed to. I will say one thing more: When we go into line we shall find ourselves in splendid trenches where shooting Boches will be as easy as shooting bottles at a fair." There was a British cheer and a roar of "He is a jolly good fellow" such as that Italian granary had never heard before in all its centuries, as the C.O. and the Second-in-Command went out to visit the other Company. The rest of the battalion was scattered between several billets, and there was no room large enough for a joint dinner. Separated in several rooms, they had the advantage over the companies in the granary of an abundance of tables and chairs, and they had decorated the rooms with creepers and branches to look as far as possible like home. Everywhere there reigned the same contentment and gaiety.

After these visits the C.O. returned to the officers' mess where dinner was waiting. The cook had surpassed himself and had made a real Christmas dinner, with ingenious innovations introduced from France and Italy. There was sparkling Asti in plenty, Chianti, and all that the heart of man could desire, above all, an atmosphere



### THE MUNICIPIO, PADUA

This drawing was made under the heavy vaulting that supports the Municipio. These cool arcades form a welcome place of retreat in summer from the heat and glare of the Piazza dei Frutti on one side and the Piazza delle Erbe on the other.





of good fellowship and geniality. When the Iron Duke said that Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton, he may well have been thinking of that public school spirit which is the most English of all things English. The periculous battalion was proud of being a happy family, and its unity was that of a house in a public school.

There were two great features of that Christmas dinner. The first was that an enterprising officer had discovered in Padua several boxes of real Christmas crackers. Men and boys, to whom shells had been for years a part of their daily life, screwed up their eyes in fearful anticipation of the explosion of a cracker, just as they did when they were children. There was a paper cap for every one, from the C.O. to the youngest Sub, and the Second-in-Command wore two.

The second feature of the evening was the music. The transport officer played the cornet, as few cornet players can, and with the Medical Officer at the piano, every song was possible. The party was ushered into the dining room to the strains of "The Roast Beef of Old England" and after dinner all the Christmas hymns were sung. Then the concert wandered through many

bye-ways. There was one song full of battalion references, which I suspect had been written by the doctor. One verse of it chanted by the C.O. with an overwhelming chorus was probably from another hand, as it told of certain crafty expedients used by the said doctor to provide his theatrical company with properties.

Later in the evening, the orchestra was strengthened by a violin and the regimental drums. From the big drum the C.O. drew marvels of vibration. There was dancing and some uproar, which came to a sudden end, at the sound of music outside. Bass voices were thundering out a Christmas carol. These martial waits were the sergeants who had come to wish their officers a happy Christmas. Far away there was a sound of guns among the mountains, and against that background "While Shepherds Watched" rang out like a battle song. There was drinking of healths and much cheering, rather to the alarm of the Italian natives. Then "The umpteenth battalion is the finest of the lot" sung to the tune of "John Brown's Body" was a great success, but already the night was growing old. The morrow was to be a hard day for everybody, as there was a long march



on the programme, and for the officers some vigorous hill climbing. There were many shouts of "Happy Christmas" and "Good night," many repetitions of the words "The best Christmas of the War," as I departed with my Italian chauffeur, who roundly vowed that he wished he had been born English.

So that Christmas in Italy came to an end, having brought that break in the monotony of toil, danger and discomfort which gave the men fresh strength for the struggle and refreshed those memories of home and country for which they were fighting.

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## CHAPTER II.

### IN THE HIGH MOUNTAINS.

UNTIL the Caporetto disaster, practically the whole of the Italian front lay in the mountains, which form the natural defences of the country on the north. At its lowest, the mountain barrier was at least as formidable as the Vosges, which on the French front were regarded as ground in which no major operations could be conducted. Yet, in the earlier part of the war, both Austrians and Italians succeeded in launching offensives on a considerable scale despite the appalling difficulties of the ground. In these circumstances, it was natural that in Italy the evolution of scientific warfare should follow very different lines from those which it followed on the French front.

The remarkable feats accomplished by the Italians in this mountain struggle, particularly in the matter of engineering, have not been fully



#### A STREET IN ASIAGO

The houses in Asiago were mere shells, the outer walls alone standing, the inside a mass of rubble and broken timber.

In Italy, with its sunshine and gay colour, you never get the same sense of mournful desolation as with the grey buildings in the shattered villages of France.





appreciated by the Allies. When the British came to their aid on the Piave, there was a tendency to laugh at the Italian mountain transport with its motley, light ramshackle vehicles, which seemed mere toys when compared with our lordly three-ton lorries, that swept over the Lombard plain like battleships under full steam. But experience soon showed that we had something to learn from the Italians in the matter of mountain transport. Even the Montello, a mere hummock, scarcely a thousand feet high, was too steep for our lorries, and when later on we took over the Asiago plateau, we had to take a leaf out of the Italians' book.

After Caporetto the Italian front was no longer exclusively mountainous. The Piave, when it leaves the mountains, runs down to the sea through a plain as flat as the plains of Flanders. Here methods of warfare which the Italian army had had no opportunity of studying practically were necessary, and not the least important work accomplished by the British and French Expeditionary Forces was the training of our Allies in all the latest developments of plain fighting. Public attention was mainly concentrated on the Piave line and on the lower

mountains adjacent to it as far as the Brenta valley, since it was on this portion of the front that any considerable change in the situation was to be expected. The high mountains on the left of the line were forgotten, though it was indispensable that these positions should be held. A certain amount was written about the work accomplished in the more easily accessible Adamello glaciers, but the sufferings and toil of the men holding the highest fighting ground in Europe, the garrison of the Ortler mountains, were passed over in silence. Yet the Alpini who were stationed in the eternal snow on the extreme left of the line displayed an unceasing heroism that deserves remembrance.

The French front ended on the Swiss border in singularly inadequate and inconclusive fashion, with a mere barbed wire fence such as might mark the boundary of any English field and through which any child might climb. After a neutral gap of rather less than 180 miles, the Italian front continued on the other side of Switzerland, the great wall of fortification which for so long barred the way to the invader.

It began with a mighty natural obstacle which formed a strange contrast with the artificial





WAYSIDE RUINS, OLD AND NEW, NEAR  
PEDEROBBA

As one entered the gorge where the Piave runs down from the Alps, the devastation of war was everywhere apparent ; scarcely a house was left intact. The ruins of a castle, that had slowly crumbled through the centuries, took their place as a natural part of the landscape.



Monte Harde  
Nov. 1918.



termination of the French front. The French front ended in a country of rolling hills and thick woods. The Italian front began with ranges of precipitous mountains and steep slopes of shining snow. The three frontiers of Austria, Italy and Switzerland, met on the Stelvio Pass, where, in time of peace, the highest carriage road in Europe connected Italy and Austria. The Pass is open for only two months in each year, July and August. For the rest of the year, before the war, it was left to the solitude of its snow. In war time, however, even in the depth of winter, there were as many men living permanently on either side of the Stelvio as there were visitors who crossed it in other days when it was free of snow. On the Italian front 9200 feet, the height of the Stelvio, was regarded as an almost moderate altitude at which to fight and hold a permanent line.

In the winter of 1917, the men in the high mountains suffered hardships less severe than those of the past winters. For weeks together the weather was glorious, and supplies were brought up with regularity and comparative ease by the transporter cables which had sprung up everywhere. In particular, the troops were

well provided with firewood, an absolute necessity for men exposed to Arctic cold, and most difficult of transport. Looking up to the mountains, one often saw little piles of wood running merrily along wires up hill sides and over gigantic precipices. The problem of the water supply was always serious owing to the extreme cold. Even with transporter cables sufficient wood could scarcely be brought up to provide from melted snow all the water needed for drinking and washing. When the bright mountain sun was shining, the water thus provided was eked out by a supply drawn from snow wells. Deep conical holes were cut into the snow and the water formed by the melting of the snow round their edges dripped down into them, and was ladled out before the evening frost could freeze it again.

The actual meeting point of the three frontiers, as they were traced in those days, was marked by an hotel that has always been partly in Italian territory, though for the duration of the war it was regarded as being on neutral soil. This hotel is perched on the mountain side, above the cutting through which the highest point of the Stelvio road passes. Owing to the



NEAR A CORPS H.Q.

A scene on the Astico, in early spring, with snow still covering the Asiago heights.





near - Camp Headquarters  
near the Western front  
March - April 1918



configuration of the ground, this strip of land on the Italian side of the pass was no man's land, and the Swiss, by agreement, occupied the whole of the hotel, which stood on a narrow strip of mountain between the opposing armies. The Austrians built their trenches immediately behind the hotel in a position of singular security, since they could scarcely be bombarded by the Italians without violation of Swiss territory.

Nowhere else on any front did there lie such a barrier of neutrality between belligerents. The hotel stood there in perfect security, with hostile guns behind it and before, but in its direction neither side could fire. In front of its windows I watched a group of human beings standing and talking at their ease in what should have been no man's land, with the opposing trenches only a hundred yards or so away on either side, without a thought for cover or danger. Through glasses I could see heavily cloaked figures wandering about round the hotel and smoking as though there was no such thing as war, without a glance to spare for the trenches where Austrian and Italian sentries were always on guard with loaded rifles, watching for the slightest movement in the lines. Whoever they

were they seemed between two fires, and it was only when an officer remarked that they were Swiss gendarmes, that I understood the situation, and remembered that there were still neutrals even in our universal war.

Very different was the attitude of another figure within my range of vision. Huddled in a greatcoat, with a carbine slung across his shoulder, he was keeping an ever watchful eye on the Austrian trenches. He was the man on the extreme left of the Italian army. On his left was no protection except the frontier of Switzerland, and on his right were all the armies of Italy. He was posted on the top of a mountain ridge, and his every movement was cautious. He kept a mass of snow between him and the nearest enemy positions, since if he were seen a machine gun would speak out instantly and his shift would be short.

War in these mountain fastnesses was, to one accustomed to the French front, a strange affair. The Italians had left nothing to chance. Barbed wire entanglements stretched across sheer precipices and steep snow slopes where there seemed no foothold for any living thing. If one asked an Italian officer why they had built such barriers



## HILLS OF ITALY

A study of rock formation in the Ligurian Alps.







across places absolutely impassable, he would reply: "Nothing is impossible to determined men. Our Alpine troops climbed just such precipices as these in the Carso and drove the enemy from even stronger positions."

The Italians had hauled up to one of the crests that command the Stelvio Pass four six-inch guns, which were concealed in snow dug-outs. It seemed scarcely conceivable that they could have been dragged to such a position up precipitous snow slopes. However, by dint of putting hundreds of men to a gun, they had been hauled up over every obstacle. The waste of labour was really rather pathetic. The guns, which were very heavy, were of an old model, and their shells could scarcely be expected to check determined troops if they tried to force the Pass. This mountain country is made for machine gun fighting, but unfortunately the Italians, handicapped by their shortage of material, had no machine guns to spare for anything except the most essential points of the front. Before our coming the Lewis gun was unknown in Italy, though it was an ideal weapon for the mountains. After our coming a few Chauchard guns, the French counterpart

of the Lewis guns, were distributed among the troops, but only in very small numbers. The Chauchard gun was a rough and ready kind of weapon, which was adopted by the French because it could be turned out in great numbers in a very short time and at small expense. Unfortunately, it was given to jamming and for mountain work it was too delicate. Could the Italians have been provided with a reasonable number of Lewis guns, they should have been able to hold their mountain front with something like half the number of men.

Without the transporter cable or *teleferica*, warfare on any considerable scale at high altitudes would have been impossible. It could bring up in extraordinarily short time supplies of all kinds, and the officers' mess on the Furcola above the Stelvio could telephone for anything needed to the town of Bormio in the valley below, and in a few hours their order would have arrived at the *teleferica* station only a few yards from the mess. Good food was an absolute necessity for men who had to face such climatic conditions. 11,000 feet up there was to be found beautiful fresh butter, while in the cities of the plain, even in Milan, butter was unprocurable. There

was plenty of fruit of every kind, including the famous candied fruit of Genoa, and stocks of the finest Chianti had migrated from Tuscany to the peaks of the Alps.

At first glance it seemed that war had left unaltered the great solitude and silence of the high Alps. Even though they were in the firing line, the loneliest climber on an untrodden peak could scarcely experience a more absolute sense of solitude than that which fell to the lot of the traveller drawn on the slender wire of the *teleferica* over barren precipices and unknown depths. Beneath him virgin snow slopes slipped slowly by with not a mark to sully their even whiteness, unless it be his own shadow, or here and there on the lower slopes the tracks of the white mountain hare, which must find some mysterious sustenance in the universal desolation, or, it might be, a furrow made by a rock rolling down from the mountains above.

The sound of artillery might well be the roar of an avalanche crashing down into the valley. Yet war had brought some subtle change that was ever present to the visitor, who, in other days, had sought recreation in the calm of high latitudes. It took some time before he could

realise the reason for his changed mood. Then he discovered that the whole scene was altered by little columns of smoke rising from every mountain ridge and peak. It was as though scores of miniature volcanoes had sprung into eruption on the heights around him. They were the fires of Austrian and Italian soldiers who were living where, in the past, scarcely one human foot had been set, and their thin wreaths of smoke formed graceful tracery against the limpid blue sky. Wooden huts had come into existence on craggy peaks and narrow ledges of rock where a goat could scarcely find foothold, to provide shelter for the men who guarded the mountain barrier year in year out.

The tourist who has in a summer holiday done a little mountaineering knows that stiff climbing may often be necessary to reach a summit over 10,000 feet above the sea. For him in summer, when climbing was easy, the glorious exhilaration of attaining the top of things was short-lived. There was barely time to take a spell of well-earned rest and survey the horizon line of snow-topped peaks before the time to descend had come. In the war men lived through the depth of winter with all its blizzards at altitudes



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#### THE SHELL-SWEPT VILLAGE OF FENER

The village of Fener lies in the gorge where the Piave runs down from the Alps. It is a mass of ruins, the nearest approach that the artist saw in Italy to the battered villages of Northern France.







exceeding 12,000 feet. The Austrian held the height record. He was established on the summit of the Ortler, over 13,000 feet above sea level, and even hauled up a mountain gun to this elevation. In the front line he held the highest peak of the Königspitz, while the Italians clung to another point 160 feet lower.

To climb these mountains in winter would, before the war, have been a feat for a practised climber. Throughout the war, Alpine troops scaled them daily, carrying on their backs material of every kind, and soldiers lived all the year round in huts built almost on their summits. In bad weather the strain on the constitution and moral of the troops was terrible. The thermometer descended far below zero, and blinding blizzards drove masses of powdered snow through every crack and chink in the doors, windows and walls of the huts. The wind could be so terrible that any man who left shelter literally could not breathe, and all activity had to be confined to the tunnels cut in the snow or glacier ice. When the weather was fine, however, the troops lived in healthy conditions, and illness, apart from frostbite and heart strain, was unknown. Five men on the sick list for

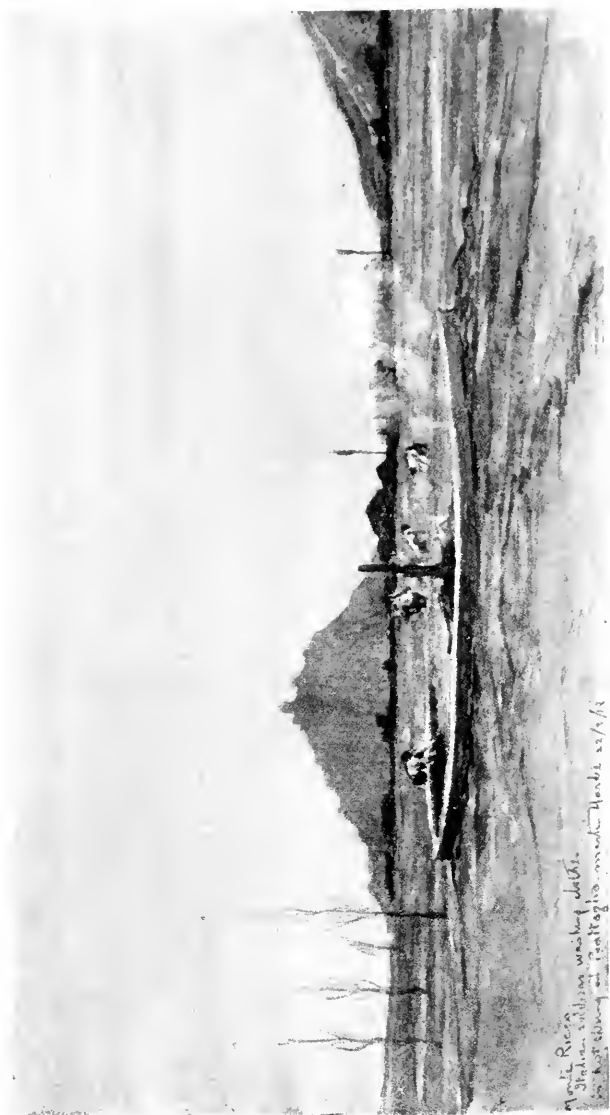
the force of 1500 men which held the Ortler group was regarded as a fair average in fine weather.

It was no light task to reach the icy fastnesses of the Ortler. A night spent at the headquarters at Bagni Nuovi afforded the stranger an opportunity of appreciating the lavish hospitality of an Italian mess. Not the least of its charms were the hot baths always available, since the water bubbles out from hot springs at an ideal temperature. From there, about 4000 feet above the sea, one started on the journey to the high mountains. The motor lorry bumped up the headlong mountain road, swinging in break neck style round hairpin bends with deep precipices on the outer side. The bumps and the speed increased prodigiously at certain points. The road through the Zebbrù Valley to the Shepherd's Huts where the *teleferica* started runs along under the sheer escarpment of the Cima di Campo, the summit of which, some 1700 feet above it, was in Austrian hands. The actual distance of the Austrian position from the road was between two and three thousand yards, and the enemy had trained a machine gun on certain points of the road in the hope of



#### HOT SPRINGS, BATTAGLIA

Battaglia is famous for its natural hot springs, which the Italians used freely, as shown in the drawing, for the washing of clothes. The bathing establishment, used as a Corps H.Q., had a natural vapour grotto with a temperature of 116° Fahr., where many British officers enjoyed the luxury of a Turkish bath.



Monte Rizzo  
The Italian vessel was here at the  
port of Genoa on the 22/4/16



impeding the revictualling of the upper valley of the Zembrù, but the distance was too great for accurate shooting, and cartridges that had been hauled up nearly 12,000 feet were very precious. The enemy only wasted two bullets on our lorry, without effect. A stone, thrown by a child of five, which had smashed our wind screen on our way up to the plain, had been a far more deadly weapon.

At the head of the valley we changed from the lorry to the transporter cable. The transporter cable or *teleferica* is the distinguishing feature of mountain warfare. It is a very simple and most alarming means of communication. Intended chiefly for the transport of material, it carried during the war certain privileged passengers whose journey to the front lines was thus enormously reduced. It is a means of transport to which one must grow accustomed. I was fortunate enough to make my first journey on the most audacious of the seven hundred *teleferice* working on the Italian front. Compared with it most other transporter cables seemed mere child's play. My first sight of that *teleferica* was from a platform on the edge of the precipice that falls sheer from the Stelvio road to the

Braulio torrent. From this platform four wire cables ran off into space, suspended in mid-air apparently by some invisible force akin to the magic of the Indian rope trick. Careful investigation, and the use of field glasses showed that these cables were fixed to some point at the top of the mountain opposite on the further side of the gorge over 2000 feet above us. They crossed the Braulio Valley, which was nearly 3000 feet deep at their starting point, with a single span of cable half-a-mile long, which, in that distance, rose a good two thousand feet. The four cables were in pairs, one for the ascending, the other for the descending car. Each pair consisted of one cable about the thickness of a man's thumb which carried the weight of the car and its load, and a thinner wire attached to a motor on the mountain which hauled the car across.

When we arrived at the station, a small Italian soldier, with some machinery urgently needed in the front line, was on the point of starting. Sitting in the tiny car he was swung off into space, and made the most forlorn picture imaginable, though no doubt he thought no more about his journey than about a ride in a



tram. Slowly he was pulled across the abyss in the utmost solitude, until he and his car were no more than a blot against the grey rocky wall of mountain far above us. Still, however, he had not reached the end of the first span of wire, and as he approached the first support of the cable on the mountain, he and the car seemed to be rising absolutely vertically. It appeared that the car must be tilted perpendicularly, and that the man and his machinery must be shot off into the void. At the time I thought this impression was an optical delusion, but I was soon to learn that it was not so far from the truth.

The other car came down and it was our turn. The car was a narrow tray of boards about six feet long, and two feet broad, with sides about three inches high. It was just possible for two people to sit in it with their legs over-lapping. I sat at the back facing the starting point, and an Italian officer was in front of me facing the same way. A shout of "Pronto" (ready) and a few minutes anxious waiting while the mechanic at the top of the mountain was warned by telephone to set the motor going, then, with a sudden jerk, we shot off over the precipice.

The first impression was less alarming than I

had anticipated. Instead of having the feeling that one was suspended over an abyss on a thread of gossamer, one felt that in some mysterious way one had been detached from the world, and that by a special dispensation the law of gravity had been suspended in one's favour. Looking down we could not see the bottom of the gulf, which was hidden thousands of feet below in the mist of the spray that rose from the torrent. The circle of snow mountains round us seemed very near, and their tranquillity appeared a mute reproach to the impudent human insects who in their puny way dared to disturb their solitude.

The car travelled on very slowly and rather jerkily as the motor drew it on with a series of little tugs. Two miles an hour was its highest speed. The car ran along the supporting cable on two overhead grooved wheels connected with it by a kind of davit arrangement, and it was only our weight and that of the car that kept them on the wire and prevented us from falling. The military *teleferica* is unprovided with safety appliances. The chief danger of this means of locomotion is that the descending car should be badly packed. The cars almost touch one



### IN AN ITALIAN VILLAGE

A corner in a hillside village of North Italy, typical in its mixture of sunshine, brilliant colour and squalor. The artist can paint something of the colour and decay—but not the smell !





another in passing and if there is a pole jutting out from one of them both cars may be precipitated into the abyss. The clash of the two cars may also happen as the result of wind. If the wind rises—and it rises suddenly in the mountains—when the cars are in the middle of a span of cable, which may be nearly a mile long, they are likely to be dashed together and sent headlong.

Another possibility is the breaking of the hauling cable, though I believe that the supporting cable has never been known to give way. When the hauling wire breaks, the cars start headlong down hill and soon run off the cable into nothingness. On one occasion an officer managed to catch hold of the cable above his head before the car fell, and he was left there suspended in mid-air. Nothing could be done for him, and the men on the mountain watched him hanging there for half an hour until his grasp failed and he was dashed to pieces. An accident which I witnessed was due to the shifting of one of the supports bedded in the Zembrù glacier. The support had moved with the glacier, and the ascending car came in contact with one of its sides. The passenger

managed to catch hold of the support, though he got his leg broken in his struggle. He climbed down the support as best he could, and was stranded for many hours on a lump of rock in the midst of a sea of ice. At last, however, the guides reached him and managed to carry him up to the Brigade headquarters in the middle of the glacier.

As we went over the Braulio gorge, the officer in front of me turned round and began to point out the principal peaks above us. His movement produced a swaying of the car which was an unwelcome reminder of our unstable equilibrium. As I tried to follow his explanation, I felt inwardly very grateful to the Austrians for letting us alone. The shelling of a transporter cable is as a rule a profitless occupation, but shrapnel is more disagreeable to the passenger in a *teleferica* than it is to the aviator, since by no means can he alter his course. After a time, when we had passed the slack of the cable, our slant became steeper and steeper in a most alarming fashion. Sitting at the back I had nothing to rest my feet against, and had to cling fast to the chains connecting us with the sliding gear on the cable above to prevent myself from slipping forward



on the back of my companion, whose feet were against the end of the car. What worried me most was that I had no idea how much steeper it was going to get. At last the car reached a slant of about sixty degrees out of the horizontal, and then, with a sudden jerk, bumped through the first support almost on the top of the mountain, becoming immediately horizontal again. We had crossed the first span of wire and the worst was over. The bottomless gorge was crossed and the precipices that remained seemed child's play since the car remained almost horizontal. My first *teleferica* journey took half an hour, and was made in two sections with a change of cable half way.

The *teleferica* up to the Ortler was less alarming and more interesting, since it passed over the Zebriù Glacier. Climbing it is impossible to obtain such an impression of a glacier as that produced by looking directly down on it from a height of several hundred feet. The ridiculous tiny black shadow of the car and its occupants glided over the bright snow surface, jumping yawning crevasses, which seemed to plunge infinitely down into unfathomable depths of pale blue half transparent ice. Beneath one lay

the tortured mass of ice, pressed onwards by the ice waves behind, with blocks and pinnacles piled madly on one another as it were by some vast cataclysm, and one looked straight down into bottomless chasms which made the heart shudder by their unplumbed depth. Fantastic masses of ice, delicately tinged with blue in the sunlight, rose one upon another in wild disorder, as though rollers and breaking waves of a great sea had been suddenly frozen. The whole flood of ice seemed to be rushing irresistibly down towards the valley below.

The aerial cable that started in the Shepherd's Huts came to a standstill on a grey island of rock in the midst of the Zèbrù Glacier. Below, the white crested waves of ice still seemed to pour down into the valley, though their actual speed of advance was to be reckoned in feet or yards for each year. Then there came a desolate grey moraine. Above, a great menacing billow of ice swelled over the counterscarp of a mountain whose peak rose black amid the eternal snow. On the island there had stood before the war the Alpine hut called the Capanna di Milano, and round it there had sprung up a number of wooden huts nestling close against the rock to

be screened from shells and avalanches. This was the domain of Colonel Mazzoli, Governor of the Ortler. The Colonel was a fanatic of the mountains, and he lived for one thing alone—to kill the Boche. He might have sat as a model, with his long fair hair and beard, for one of the Old Masters' pictures of an Apostle, and he was burnt up with the fire of patriotism. He was the nephew of Orsini, who threw a bomb at Napoleon III., and his enthusiasm for liberty was equal to his love of the mountain solitude. A veteran soldier, he had fought all over the world, and in the Ortler he had earned from the enemy the nickname of "He Who Never Sleeps." Night and day he was on the watch. He never undressed except to change his clothes, and if he had two hours' sleep in the twenty-four, he thought he had done well. All through the night he sat by the telephone when he was at headquarters, always ready to ring up unexpectedly the outposts on which all our security depended. The worse the weather, the more keenly was he alert. Night and day he never failed to assure himself of the unceasing vigilance of his men.

Red-tape was his particular abomination. The

complicated accounts required by the Italian army drove him wild, and he spent the greater part of his pay in making up deficits due simply to his hatred of office work. The strain of this life had told on him; his eyes were always suffused with blood, yet, with his long fair hair and beard, he was a magnificent figure. For seventeen months he had never slept at less than 10,000 feet above the sea, except for one fortnight when he was called home by the death of his mother. His men worshipped him. He would take no precautions, and was to be seen everywhere with his hair streaming in the wind, a figure which was the target of every Austrian sharp-shooter.

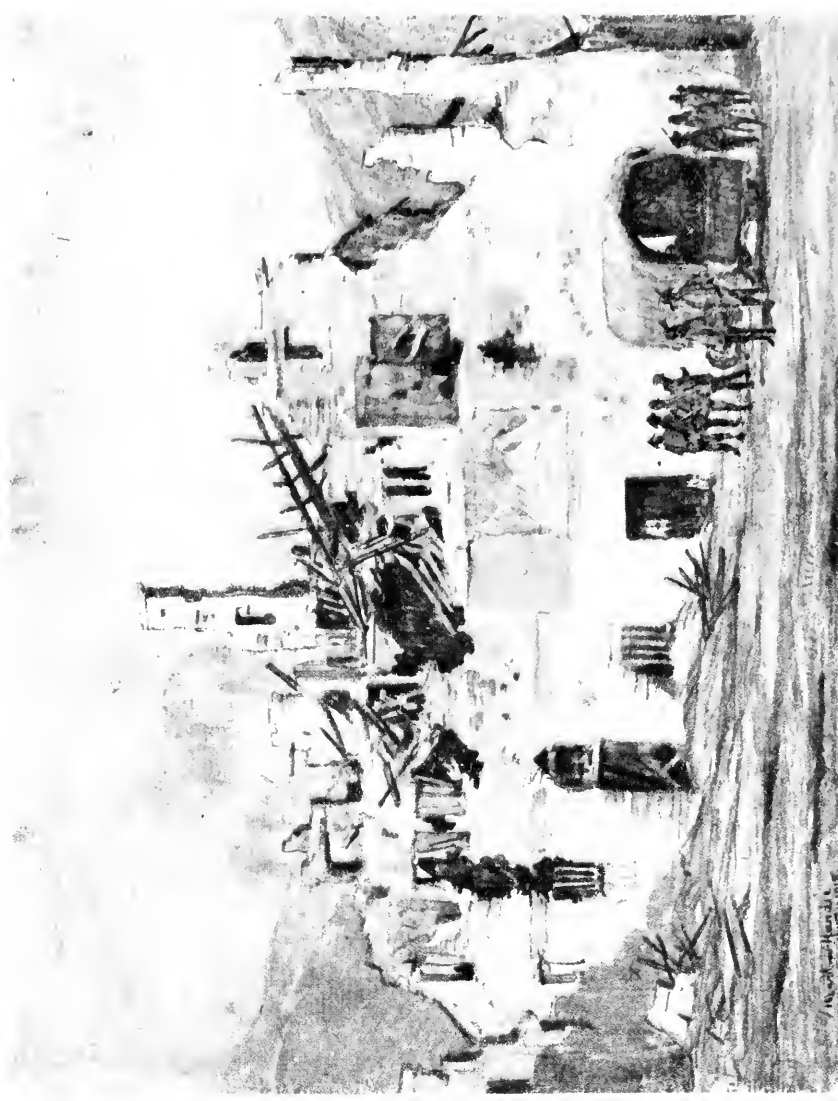
He was the "King of the Ortler," and the Austrians expressed their respect for him by firing at him every time they saw the tall, hatless figure striding across the glacier. He had been wounded eleven times, but physically and morally he was a giant of strength. He was kept up by the fanaticism of the idea: all his life might be summed up in the words—"hatred of tyranny."

I stayed for some time with him in his headquarters, and from there made daily journeys



### THE BEST PRESERVED HOUSE IN FENER

A typical scene in the war zone. Among the many hundred houses in Fener, not one was left in a habitable condition.







to his front lines that were in truth on the very roof of Europe. In the evenings we returned very weary to the shelter of the huts expecting to sleep, but at first sleep was a mere word, for the air was so rarefied that it took at least forty-eight hours before one's system was accustomed to it. One dozed off, only to wake immediately gasping uncomfortably for breath, and climbing one puffed and blowed with surprising zest. However, it was consoling to find that the hardy mountaineers who had been living there for months and years were nearly as much out of condition. At such an altitude a great strain is thrown on the heart, if the lungs are to obtain the amount of oxygen required by the body. Men stationed for long at these altitudes paid for it with over-strained hearts. Yet they all of them looked in marvellous health, burnt copper brown by the snow and dazzling sun. The Alpine troops were marked out from all other soldiers by the colour of their faces, and one officer told me that when he went home to Genoa people stared at him as if he was a savage.

One day I went with the Colonel to his front line on the Ortler Pass, about a thousand feet above us, and almost all the journey was done

in ice tunnels. The Ortler group was a fortress of ice and frozen snow. Its highest battlements rose to a height of between 11,000 and 12,000 feet, and in this outer wall the enemy was always trying to make a breach. In this attempt he had an important advantage, since he held on the west the Cima di Campo (11,600) and on the east the summit of the Königspitz (12,860). These great mountains were, like towers at the extreme points in the semi-circle which the Italians were defending, forming an integral part of the fortifications, and from them the Austrians had extended views into the interior of the fortress. This interior consisted of a big glacier broken here and there by an emerging peak of rock, and to avoid the observation of the enemy it had been necessary to bury the defensive organisation below the surface of the ice.

There could be no communication trenches, since not only could the enemy look down into them from above, but also cold and blizzards were at such altitudes far more deadly to unprotected men than Austrian bullets, so the Italians burrowed deep into the ice of the glacier, building miles of tunnels. The front lines consisted of continuous galleries with a

roof of ice several feet thick which ran along the crest of the mountains and were only broken by the huge masses of rock that formed the mountain peaks. Some idea of the extent of the sector defended by 1500 men may be gathered from the fact that it took the Colonel seven days to visit the whole of his front line.

Trenches are mean and sordid, and have no aesthetic attraction. The ice galleries all formed part of a fairy fortress, an ice palace, which was beautiful beyond human imagining. As the mountaineer knows to his cost, the glacier, even when its snow-covered surface stretches smooth and unbroken to the eye as the sugar on a wedding cake, is seamed with treacherous crevasses of untold depth. It was these crevasses which made the glory of the fortress below the ice. Out of the burning sun one plunged into the cold stillness of the ice. Outside the snow was dazzling in its whiteness. Below the light filtered softly through walls of transparent blue. Then as the tunnel burrowed into the heart of the glacier, always inclining upward towards the front lines on the peaks above, the light faded away and all was dark except for the flares carried by the guides.

There were long staircases to be climbed, and sometimes to avoid a crevasse there would be a series of deep steps to be descended. Then as a corner was turned, there appeared far ahead a mysterious blue radiance. As one approached it grew stronger and stronger, until the light of the flares seemed dim and yellow. Half-dazzled one stepped out of the tunnel on to a crazy narrow bridge of planks. A huge cavern of ice and snow, with the light pouring dazzling white through the mass of snow above and filtering blue through blocks of ice, stretched endlessly on either hand. Beneath, it descended into gulfs of nothingness. A hundred feet overhead, glistening snow crystals, shaped like flowers, formed capitals to pillars of ice, which supported huge blocks perilously balanced to roof in the fairy throne room.

Never artist of the Renaissance essayed decoration so rich, never did architect conceive so dangerous and so marvellous a beauty. With regret we tore ourselves away and crossing the bridge went forward along the never-ending tunnel. Again and again we crossed crevasses that were great natural cathedrals, until we came back again to the surface at a point far away

up the glacier slope, screened from Austrian observation.

There were miles and miles of these tunnels in the ice, and their construction never ceased throughout the war. In some parts of the glacier there was already a labyrinth of passages, joined up in every direction with special arrangements for protection against poison gas, and so planned that, if the enemy were to establish a footing at any point, he would find himself surrounded and attacked from every side through unexpected galleries. It was the patience and untiring labour of a handful of men which had accomplished this gigantic task. In the circumstances of mountain-warfare, only a handful of men can be fed and kept warm enough to live. Everything had to be brought up the first ten thousand feet on the aerial cable, which had only a limited capacity. Other and smaller cables connected with certain points of the front line, but there were many places where it was impossible to construct the *teleferica*, and the only possible means of transport was the human back. In snowstorms and blinding mist, the alpine porters struggled up precipices and ice walls carrying provisions, ammunition, and the firewood without which existence was

impossible. Twenty-two pounds of wood is a man's load, and a very heavy one for such climbing, and even in summer stoves had to be kept going night and day in the first line posts, which were all over 11,000 feet above the sea.

Sometimes the best climber in the world could not venture across the glacier. It was possible to run the gauntlet of the machine guns but nothing could face the Alpine blizzard, and in winter for days the men, who were as yet unconnected by tunnels to the central point of the glacier fortress, had to live on stocks that had been accumulated at endless pains. Always cold, with their clothes either wet through or frozen hard, suffering from the great strain on the heart caused by the rarefaction of the atmosphere, the Alpine soldiers of Italy worked on and on till human nature could do no more, and they had to be sent down to the valley below with their constitutions ruined.

Most of our journey to the Ortler Pass was carried out in ice tunnels, but for the last few hundred yards we had to come out into the open and scramble up as best we could through heavy snow. One of the most maddening enemies with which the Italians' engineers had to contend

was the perpetual movement of the glacier. Eternally the whole glacier glides down towards the valley, a few yards a year and quite enough to ruin a tunnel that has been the work of months. The top of the glacier moves more quickly than the lowest stratum, which has greater friction to overcome since in its movement it is rubbing against the solid rocks beneath. Consequently there is a strong tendency for the ice tunnels to close in or collapse after a certain time.

The movement of the glacier is mysterious, as it seems to have something of a lateral motion. On the way up to the Payer-Joch, we had to pass through a gallery which was absolutely pestilential. For a long time the men who built the tunnel could not account for the horrible odour which made a gas-mask almost necessary. It seemed that nothing could be cleaner and sweeter than the virgin ice through which the gallery was broken. Eventually it appeared that the ice had shifted and that the tunnel ran through a portion of the glacier which had once lain below the "Pass of the Volunteers," where there had been an encampment of considerable size at the beginning of the war.

In the soft snow, fast movement was impossible.

For the last part of the journey we were in full view of the Austrians on the Cima di Campo, and for that matter they were well within our range of vision. We watched three Austrians struggling along the snow arête, loaded with wood and provisions, and saw them disappear into an ice-tunnel like rabbits into a hole. They did not interfere with us and we did not interfere with them. An enemy machine gun, however, fired away noisily at a line of Italians who were crossing the glacier 500 feet below. They were coming downhill and travelling fast and the Austrians merely wasted cartridges.

The front line of the Ortler Pass consisted of a long ice tunnel parallel to the enemy, with openings in its walls for machine guns. Behind the first line of trenches were three wooden huts with their backs resting against the naked rock. Here the garrison slept and warmed itself in comparative comfort.

Peeping cautiously round a pinnacle of rock, too sheer for the snow to stay on it, I looked for the Austrian position. Immediately beneath my feet was a precipitous ice wall falling sheer a thousand feet. It seemed inconceivable that any troops could climb it, even if there were no



enemy waiting for them at the top. Yet in the last war such feats were accomplished.

The Austrian mountain troops were magnificent climbers, especially on ice, though on rock the Italians were decidedly their superiors. In mountain fighting a few audacious men had only to climb to a commanding point supposed to be inaccessible in order to turn a whole line of defence. As the Colonel said, if three Austrians could establish themselves at certain points of his line, they might compel him to retreat from the whole of his first position and indeed from the whole of the Ortler fortress. In mist or in a blizzard, which made it impossible for the defenders to come on the crest out of cover while the attacking party was partially sheltered by the mountain side, three or four men roped together might, if the most careful watch were not kept day and night, work their way up the glacier wall and rush one of the openings of the gallery.

The value of every post of vantage was clear when we looked down from an ice observation post on the rear of the enemy lines. Every yard of the enemy main line of communications, the great zigzag road up the Stelvio Pass, was

clearly visible and we could see for miles into the Austrian Alps, which formed a gigantic background of ice and snow.

On the next day, the Colonel and I were accompanied by the chief guide, who was known universally in the lines as "Il Mago," "The Magician," since he was always performing the impossible.

Il Mago, the great guide, was a strange contrast to the Colonel, whom he adored. Bearded, with quiet eyes and a smile like the sun on the glacier snow, he recalled the type of a Drake or a Frobisher. A man of many wiles, he was the "King of Guides": nothing could tire him, and not a stone of his mountains was unknown to him. There was a simple reverence about the man that was very touching; for him the mountains were all the world; they were to him what the sea is to the sailor. "Respect the mountain," he said to me one day, "that is the first principle of all mountaineering. Those who do not truly reverence the snow and the glacier and the peaks, those the mountain punishes with death." There was one mountain that he loved, a mountain that was the perfection of the Creator's art. It was the Turmweisespitz,

the tower-like peak. It was well named, for its perfect proportions recalled in some way the Lily Tower of Sienna. Of all mountains that I have ever seen, it is the only one suggestive of lightness. It always seems to be on the point of leaving the earth and losing itself in the sky.

Our destination that day was the Payer-Joch, 12,000 feet up. Here the ice wall was too precipitous to allow of the building of galleries, and it was only to be reached by straightforward climbing. The track across the glacier immediately above headquarters was marked by a line of telephone posts, but it was not advisable to follow that track on so clear a day. The enemy detachment on the Königspitz had a way of firing on men they saw on the track and they had the range to a nicety. Il Mago led the way, and I, as the novice, came next, and Colonel Mazzoli, a magnificent climber, brought up the rear.

Between us and the summit of the Königspitz there were some rock pinnacles, and it was our object to dodge about in such a way that one of these pinnacles was always between us and the enemy's machine gun. The surface of the glacier looked smooth and safe enough. The

snow was dazzling white and as smooth as sugar on a cake. It was, however, treacherous. There were crevasses everywhere, covered with a thin roof of snow that would give way under a man's weight.

We were not roped, as the Colonel hated such precautions, and Il Mago had the mountaineer's sixth sense, which told him instinctively when the snow was safe or dangerous. So we followed him, zigzagging here and there, until we reached the foot of the ice wall. In preparation for our coming, steps had been cut in the ice and we worked our way up at a respectable speed. The enemy loosed off a few bullets at us which, if unhappily they did not lend us wings, at least encouraged the weary climber to struggle on, and reach shelter as quickly as possible. About half-way up we saw an Alpino coming down towards us. He bounded down the ice precipice as easily as a fly runs down a perpendicular wall. He was Il Mago's faithful lieutenant, the second guide, hasting down to meet us. Even Il Mago could not restrain his admiration at the man's extraordinary agility. "Non è un uomo" said he, "ma un camoscio." "He is not a man, but a chamois."

After his arrival it did not take us long to reach the advance post on the Payer-Joch, where we found a small party of very cheerful Alpini. They had just accomplished a great work which menaced very serious trouble for the enemy, and the working party had been rewarded by ten days' special leave.

After a few minutes spent in the hut nestled against a rock, which, apart from the ice tunnels, was their only shelter, we went out to see the great work. The Alpini, all of them territorials between 35 and 45, were as keen as children to show us what they had accomplished, and they grudged every minute that we spent in regaining breath. They had built a new tunnel through the further slope of the glacier, right away into Austria, far behind the enemy lines. The front line in the Ortler followed pretty closely the old frontier, and at this point the Alpini had carried forward their gallery over the most difficult of glaciers, seamed by enormous crevasses, to an isolated, inaccessible rock, a thousand yards away and some seven hundred feet higher than the starting point. Only the night before the workers had broken through into the outer air. In the darkness they could not see if their

object had been attained. All the operation had been directed by rough and ready methods and the most complicated instrument used was a pocket compass, so that considerable error in direction was not impossible.

The Austrians were above and all round the men as they worked, yet they had succeeded in blasting a passage through the rock where it cropped out near the surface of the glacier without arousing the enemy's attention. The noise of the explosion had no doubt been taken by his sentries for the roar of an avalanche. Just beyond the rock the Italian working party had opened a window in a huge hummock of ice, and from there they hoped to have new and valuable views over the Austrian position.

It was a long thousand yards to the end of the gallery, up and down ice staircases and across perilous plank bridges, spanning vast crevasses. The exciting moment came when we reached the end of the tunnel, and the mysterious window that overlooked new ground. No one as yet had seen what lay beyond the pile of rocks which masked the window. When the work was finished, the opening had been closed with

snow and backed with a tarpaulin held in place by a pile of rocks so that there should be no danger of the enemy perceiving a dark opening in the white glacier wall. This shutter had frozen into the consistency of metal and it took many blows of the pickaxe and miner's hammer to break it open.

I was given the honour of the first glimpse of the undiscovered country. It was indeed "a magic casement opening on faery seas forlorn," on a headlong, tumbled sea of ice and on a melancholy grey moraine, which deserved the name of the glacier behind it, "Das Ende der Welt," the end of the world.

I wriggled my way through the narrow aperture to the outer sheet of snow and lay with a heap of snow masking my cheek on the side nearest to the enemy's observation post on the Königspitz, trying to realise that my window had been made not for the greater glory of the mountain but for the grim realities of war. At last I grew accustomed to the wild beauty of the scenery that seemed so dazzling after the icy darkness of the tunnel, and I began to see that the gallery had more than accomplished its builders' purpose. At comparatively

short range, I was overlooking the entire communications of the Königspitz position.

The one path passing steeply up the glacier side by which the Austrians could revictual their advance positions, lay open and exposed within easy rifle shot. Lower down the valley I could trace the course of an aerial cable on which the provisioning of the whole valley must depend. Once it was screened in perfect security by the mass of the mountain, but now the Italian observers could direct upon it the shells from their batteries stationed on the further slopes of the glacier. Near the black, sheer peak of the Königspitz above my head, there was a dark opening which I recognised as the mouth of an ice tunnel, such as that through which we had passed. Here two men were at work carrying into the gallery wood that had been brought up from the aerial cable below. They took no precautions and worked in the open as they had worked for months before, secure in the illusion that there were millions of tons of rock between them and an hostile eye.

Down on the moraine below there was a good sized Alpine hut where the Austrians had evi-





### CAMOUFLAGED TENTS

A typical piece of camouflage at an anti-aircraft post on the Italian front. The dabs of green, roughly following the colour and form of leaves, seem very effective in a painter's judgment, but the camouflage scientist later condemned attempts at colour treatment. The four apparent posts on the left are anti-aircraft guns protruding from pits.



Camp at Hualapai Falls  
Marathon, Texas  
August 1912



dently been working. Part of the wall had been removed and there were signs of camouflage. It seemed clear that the Austrians had turned the hut into a battery position, and guns at that point might have caused us considerable annoyance, as the Colonel calculated that their shells would drop almost exactly in the middle of our headquarters. The Capanna di Milano was bombarded by the enemy from time to time, but, owing to the mountains, the shells always landed too low to damage anything except a few store huts. The living huts were built under the shelter of great crags, and up to that time the Austrians had had no guns in any position that could reach them. As a matter of fact, the enemy was never able to use the battery which we had spotted, as, thanks to the new observation post, the Italians were able to knock it out before it did any harm.

The working party richly deserved its coveted reward of leave. The whole gallery had been built by a party of ten men under the command of a corporal. These men had not only to work at the tunnel and keep perpetual guard, but also to bring up on their backs all their provisions and fuel from two thousand feet below. It

was only six weeks before the completion of the tunnel that their labours were lightened by the construction of a *teleferica* to a neighbouring peak. For seven months they toiled with the pickaxe, tunnelling through ice that was almost as hard as rock and strata of compressed snow that were harder than ice. They had had to dive down hundreds of feet to avoid crevasses, and a part of the tunnel had had to be remade, because of the movement of the upper walls of a big crevasse. One Alpino boasted that his pickaxe was responsible for one half of the gallery. During these seven months they had no rest, except a few hours in their wooden hut 12,000 feet above the sea, and in time of blizzards, when the wind was so strong that a man outside could not breathe; the only living room was thick with driving snow-dust that forced its way through every crack. There were few achievements of this war which could surpass in patience and endurance the work of the Alpine soldiers.

We became very cold standing about in the ice tunnel. The Colonel, after looking out over the enemy line, discussed where an opening should be made for a machine gun, and how

the observation post could be most conveniently finished. Almost freezing, we got to the huts on the Payer-Joch and there hot coffee restored our circulation. Later we watched the guide, who was "not a man but a chamois," accomplish one of the prettiest pieces of climbing I have ever seen. About a thousand feet above, there was a row of jagged teeth of rock, which stood out black against the snow. Eighteen months before, a party of Italian Alpini had tried to surprise the Austrian garrison on the Königspitz, by working their way up the mountain past these teeth. A guide had fastened a rope to one of these small peaks, in order to help his comrades. The enterprise had failed, as it was quite impossible to scale the Königspitz at that point, and the rope had been left behind when the party returned. The rope was still there, and at that moment rope was a scarce and precious article in the Italian mountains.

The second guide, the "chamois," announced his intention of going up and bringing back the rope single-handed. The Colonel was a little afraid that the man might break his neck, but Il Mago reassured him and leave was given. The solitary little figure worked its way up along

the edge of a snow cornice that overhung a sheer ice wall several thousand feet high. From time to time the climber would stop, throw himself flat on the snow and peep over to see that he was not getting too near the edge. In a surprisingly short time he reached the foot of the peaks and found the rope. Through the glasses we saw him pulling at it hard, but the knot still held and he was forced to give us an exhibition of rock climbing. Somehow or other he made his way up the sheer teeth of rock, untied the rope and then came down upon us at a gallop, trailing it behind.

We returned to headquarters without any incident of importance. Il Mago wanted to draw the enemy's fire, as he was anxious to discover the exact emplacement of the Austrian machine gun on the Königspitz, so he stopped by one of the telephone posts on the trail and levelled his field-glasses at the enemy's position. A machine gun banged away and after a few moments Il Mago found things getting too hot for him, so he started off at a great pace, despite the heavy snow, to rejoin us.

The evening spent in the mess on that island on the glacier will always remain among my



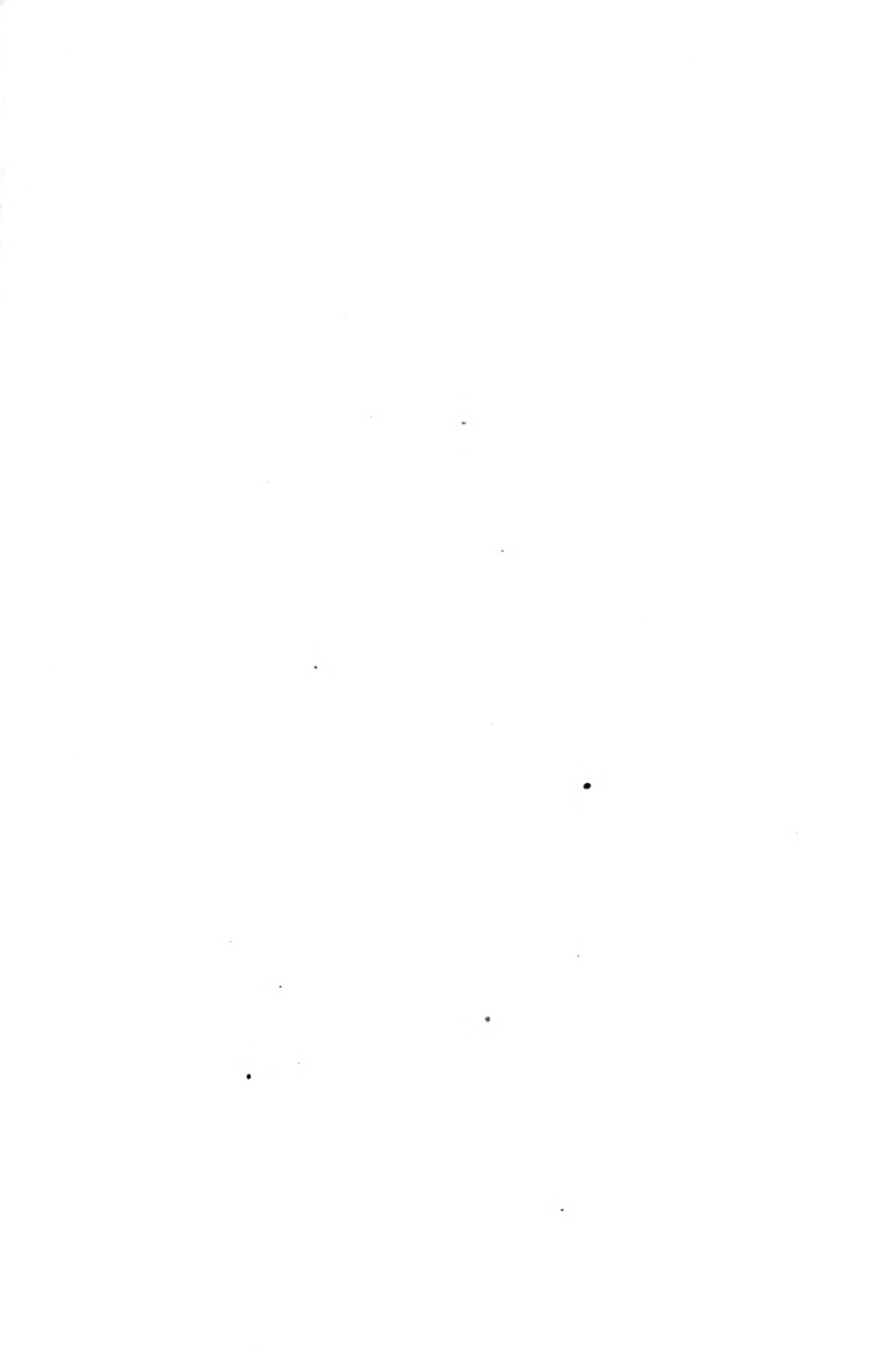
pleasantest memories. There was an abundance of food, and after dinner, as it was fine, we collected on the terrace of the Colonel's hut to watch the Alpine glow. It was at that time the dogs were fed. There were about a hundred of them, and they pulled sleighs valiantly across the glacier. Of those hundred there were twelve that had the special privilege of having their kennels near the General's hut. They were the General's own dogs and he treated them with the same paternal authority as he treated his men. They were of all sorts and sizes and every dog had his special dish.

When dinner-time came the dishes, big and small, were ranged outside the kennels, and the kennels were opened. Every dog poked his nose out, snuffing and whimpering a little at the thought of food, but not a dog moved until the order came. Then each dog went to his dish and gobbled up his dinner with the appetite of a mountaineer. There was no quarrelling or confusion, but there was one chartered libertine. He was a black mongrel of no particular breed and had a highly developed brain. He had struck up a friendship with a great St. Bernard, which was the unquestioned lord of the

pack. The Italians used to call this ill-assorted couple, "Gli Alleati," "the Allies." If anyone, man or dog, dared touch a hair of the small black mongrel, Lion, the big St. Bernard, was on him in an instant.

At dinner-time the small dog refused to eat out of his own dish, but insisted on bolting half of poor Lion's food. Lion protested and tried to push his black friend aside, with an enormous paw, but the greedy beast would only turn on him with a snarl and Lion would retreat abashed. Eventually, however, things straightened themselves out. When the black dog had eaten as much as he could possibly contain, there was still a good bit left in Lion's basin for its rightful owner, and he wound up by eating the black dog's untouched dish. It was a glorious life for the dogs. Loose on the glacier, they would race away up the mountain sides under the care of two guides, scrambling up and down precipices and barking with delight until the Colonel's whistle called them all back at a gallop to their kennels.

Every Sunday morning the chaplain said Mass in an improvised chapel. The altar alone was covered, while the men stood in the open.



#### A HILL CHAPEL

Typical of the many shrines that are dotted over the hills of North Italy. It stands deserted—a service is held perhaps once a year—but it remains as an incentive to a climb, if only for the sake of seeing the panorama of hills and valleys all round.





The chaplain was a little bearded man with spectacles, who was always laughing and always arguing. He was, I think, of peasant birth and I never saw a man more enthusiastic in his profession. Every day he would climb for hours to some outlying post, and he was a most valuable assistant to the doctor, who was a Free-thinker.

Those services on the glacier island had a setting that the finest cathedral might envy. Immediately behind the altar there arose a huge black crag, over which there bulged an enormous wave of snow and ice. It seemed that the whole mass must come thundering down at any moment, and from time to time a mass of ice would detach itself when the sun was hot and go thundering away into the valley below. When service was finished, the Colonel would address his men, and I remember one day how he explained to them that they were taking too many prisoners. "We have no right to take prisoners," he said, "we are here on a sacred mission. That mission is so perilous that we dare not take any risks. If an Austrian thinks that he can go out at night on a raid and try to capture some point of our line without incurring the only penalty that counts, the penalty of death, he will be en-

couraged to try the adventure. We have not enough men to hold our line in force, so we must teach the Austrian that if he dares the adventure, he has no alternative but success or death. Then as we all know he will not try."

His speech ended with a moving eulogy of his men. "You are here," he said in effect, "in a place where no one thinks of you. No one gives us credit for our sufferings and our toil, but our work is its own reward. We are always tired and that should be our greatest pride. The true Alpino should always be tired for he has no time to rest or sleep."



## CHAPTER III.

### LAKE GARDA.

THE value of inland water-borne traffic was fully realised in France and Belgium, and military work of the greatest importance was carried out by the canal system behind the French and British fronts. In Italy, supplies of every kind were brought up to the front across Lake Garda, and the services rendered by the lake transport were greatly extended by some remarkable engineering work which would have been impossible if the Italians had not, thanks to the capture early in the war of the Altissimo, the abrupt mountain that dominated Riva, made themselves undisputed masters of the greater part of the lake.

The fighting line passed through the lake itself, yet there were few places that appeared further away from the war than the towns round its shores. I stayed for a while at Salò, and some-

times to remind us of reality a grey steamer armed with anti-aircraft guns and towing a big barge loaded with stores of every kind, came swiftly to the landing stage and embarked detachments of Alpini on their way to the firing line. More often, however, the landing stage was monopolised by a number of small boys splashing aimlessly about in their father's fishing boats, and enjoying themselves as only Italian children can.

The scenery at the southern end of Garda is beautiful and peaceful, rich in colouring, and luxuriant with vegetation. As one goes northwards, the lake becomes wilder and more rugged, though its western bank is still covered with olive orchards, and the curious hot-beds in which limes and lemons are grown. These hot-houses consist of stone or concrete pillars some fifteen feet high with a roof above them, and in winter the plants are protected by glass frames hung between the pillars. Tall and narrow they are set evenly in terraces one above the other, and at a distance they suggest a bar of honeycomb rising against the hillsides.

On the north, the lake is surrounded by mountains, and their precipices descend sheer into its

waters. On the western bank, a wall of rock rises several thousand feet above the lake. "L'Horrido," the rugged, it is called locally, and the name describes its appearance well. To carry supplies over this barrier to the trenches in the Ladro Valley beyond it, might well seem impossible, but all difficulties were surmounted by Italian engineering skill and perseverance. The steamers and barges brought their cargoes of men and material over the lake to the small coves which here and there made it possible to land at the foot of the Horrido. From these points roads had been built, cut in the living rock, where before the war there was no foothold for any living being. One followed their track for miles as they zigzagged this way and that, plunging into tunnels and across bridges spanning torrents and waterfalls. Now and then they would turn into the face of the mountain and disappear in a long gallery, only to reappear at some unexpected point further up the hill.

This road building was a marvellous feat. Occasionally there would come the sound of an explosion which was nearer and sharper than the detonations that reached the lake from the Ladro Valley, where fitful firing was almost

continuous. A puff of smoke on the face of an inaccessible cliff provided the explanation. Engineers were at work blasting a new road through every obstacle. These steep mountainous roads were passed each day by streams of motor lorries, which met the boats and brought up their cargoes, on their way down travelling at headlong speed despite break-neck gradients and hairpin bends. The motor lorry service was supplemented by invaluable transporter cables. One could watch the supplies moving jerkily along over the precipices, suspended on wires that at a distance seemed no thicker than a gossamer.

A very careful lookout was kept all along the lake for enemy aeroplanes, and the enemy never ventured to show himself in the air except at a tremendous height. In truth, the country was not favourable for aerial work. The batteries were many of them stationed almost on the summit of the mountains, perhaps six or seven thousand feet above sea-level, and the aviators, if they were not to be unpleasantly close to them, had to fly at a great altitude.

Just as we were entering one of the ports mainly used by the Garda flotilla, the news was

flashed all down the lake that an enemy aeroplane had been signalled. The guns far above us in the snow of Monte Baldo opened fire, and the white puffs of shrapnel shot up above the peaks as though they were wreaths of snow-dust swept up by a whirlwind. The unwelcome visitor promptly wheeled round and the noisy echoes that had disturbed the peace of the mountains died away.

The lake guards were very comfortably lodged in the villas that were once the favourite resort of the German and Austrian. In the past, the Boche was the scourge of Garda, and it was only in war time that it was possible to appreciate its charm without the interference of guttural German sounds. It was curious to observe how the Boche had imitated the Italian decoration. The walls of his villas were covered with paintings inside and out, but the designs instead of being graceful or quaint, like the decorations of an Italian villa, were gross and vulgar. Female forms of surpassing fatness, cherubs suffering from dropsy, and animals, such as mice and dogs, which had not recovered from a surfeit of something unwholesome, were the "leit-motiv" of all the wall paintings. It was the hope of the natives

that after the war, French, English, and Americans would oust the German from his monopoly of one of the most beautiful lakes in Europe.

Our Italian hosts were very anxious to give us a sight of the Austrians, and the Commander, who was responsible for the Lake, put a motor boat at our disposal. We were lucky to have a bright sunny day, as it gave us an opportunity of seeing clearly all the Austrian positions. The Austrian was a far nicer enemy to deal with than the German. On days of good visibility he did not open fire wildly, like the Boche, on the harmless spectator, but, provided the visitor kept within bounds and did not break certain unwritten conventions, he was welcome to examine the enemy's lines at close quarters and undisturbed.

We were almost in enemy waters when the swift motor-boat began to hug the shore close under the bare beetling crags of the Horrido, which descended sheer into Lake Garda in gigantic precipices. It seemed that a stone dislodged from the overhanging summit some four thousand feet above us would meet with no obstacle until it crashed down into the boat. There was a great snow-covered mountain ahead, an observation post in enemy hands, but though

the mountain stood out clear in all its details in the sunlit air, there was a little mist still hanging over the water, and it was scarcely likely that the Austrian sentinels, with the sun in their eyes would be able to distinguish us as we darted along in the shadow of the rocks.

Our speed increased as we approached a cape that hid from us the Austrian shore, the cape beyond Limone. Scudding at twenty knots, with a broad wide wake astern, we rounded the point and were in full view of the enemy. We could count the windows in the big hotel at Torbole, where no doubt an Austrian Staff was lodged. Then as we swung out towards the centre of the lake the white houses of Riva flashed up gleaming through a few stray wisps of mist. Behind the town rose the red cliff of Monte Brione, which commands the whole of the Gulf of Riva, the northern extremity of Lake Garda. There the enemy kept perpetual watch and ward and the slopes bristled with batteries. On the left, the mass of La Rocchetta, five thousand feet above sea-level, crossed the fire of its guns with those of Monte Brione, ready to blow out of the water any audacious

boat that might try to force the boom across the neck of the gulf.

To advance further would have been a challenge verging on the impudent. Some of the enemy's guns were little over a mile away, and by this time every Austrian look-out must have signalled our appearance. With a Colt machine gun in the bows, and in the stern a handy small calibre gun, such as battleships used to carry against torpedo attack, our boat could have given a good account of herself had any enemy small craft come out of the gulf to attack her, but she was incapable of tackling shore batteries, such as those that defend the Austrian shore. So we put about and began to steer a diagonal course across the lake towards the eastern or Veronese bank. Our skipper, who had taken part in the Duke of the Abruzzi's North Polar expedition, kept us within view of the enemy as long as possible. We had worked up to full speed and left astern a broad track of sparkling foam across the deep blue, almost purple, water, that glittered like a mirror in the sunlight. It seemed impossible that the enemy should ignore so impertinent a trespasser in his waters, but a motor boat travelling fast



stern on is no easy target, and he wasted no shell. Soon Riva and Torbole were swallowed up in the haze and our dash to the lake front was over.

From the North Sea to the Adriatic, there were some six hundred and fifty miles of continuous fortifications, broken only by a gap of nearly two hundred miles of neutral Swiss territory and by a mile and a half of water in the Gulf of Riva. Lake Garda had a unique portion on the western front, since it was the one point that was held by a fleet or rather flotilla. The Italian Admiralty was responsible for its defence and all its steam and motor boats were manned by Italian blue-jackets under the command of naval officers. Before the war, the frontier ran some three miles south of the northern boundary of the lake, but at the beginning of the war the Italians advanced about a mile on either shore, leaving to the enemy little more than the Bay of Riva. On the west or Brescian bank they carried their lines into the Ladro Valley, and on the east they captured the summit of the mountain called the Altissimo. Despite its name, the Altissimo, which rises to a height of 6800 ft., is not the highest point above the lake. Several of the summits of Monte Baldo,

the chain of mountains that run along its eastern bank further south, rise over 7000 ft. By its position, however, as an isolated mass, it dominates the whole of the northern waters of the lake. The Altissimo was captured before the enemy realised the intention of the Italians, who had been careful before the declaration of war to make no fortifications or warlike preparations at this point. With the Altissimo in their hands, the lake became for them an invaluable means of communication carrying up in proximity to the front lines, almost without danger, both men and material. Moreover, the mountain dominated Riva, and the enemy could make no considerable preparations to challenge Italian supremacy on the lake, unseen. If he had tried to launch anything larger than a motor-boat with a view to attacking the Garda flotilla, his intention would have been known immediately.

Yet nothing had been left to chance. The possibility of an enemy submarine making an appearance and interfering with military transport or raiding the lake towns had been considered and a number of motor-boats were provided with depth charges and all that experience on the high seas had shown to be required for

the destruction of U-boats. Lake Garda is very deep, and there is no real reason why an Austrian submarine should not have suddenly appeared fifteen miles or so behind the Italian lines.

It was also conceivable that the Austrians might try to disembark a force in the rear of the Italian trenches across the mountains. For such events the flotilla was always on the alert. At night the north end of Garda offered a picturesque sight. The Austrians had two searchlights on Monte Brione, and one of great power on La Rocchetta. As soon as darkness fell their rays crossed in front of the entrance to the Gulf of Riva, making a zone of continuous light and magnifying the mass of the precipitous mountains. The Italians on their side swept the waters in front of Riva and Torbole with their searchlights, so that nothing might slip by unseen. Often the lake was covered with thick mist that blinded the searchlights, and then motor boats slipped out from the rocky coves into the grey vapour and patrolled in lines, with their motors working at half speed, silently, so that the enemy might have no warning of their presence. Like ghosts they crept to and fro ready for action at any moment.

It was not all fair weather sailing. Garda, which with a length of thirty-two miles and a breadth varying between two and a-half miles in the north and eleven miles in the south, is the largest of the Italian lakes, is very treacherous. Often, especially in February, a sudden storm sweeps down upon it, and the wind rushing down from the mountains, to be penned up between the precipices of its banks, lashes its waters into waves so big that all navigation becomes impossible.

The lake is a point of real strategic importance, since it bars one of the valleys that offers to the invader a natural route to the plain. As the castles built on its bank prove, it has been for centuries a place to be defended. Peschiera at its south-eastern corner is the north-western point of the famous quadrilateral, which includes Verona, Mantua, Legnago. Throughout the war the lake was a death-trap for any enemy who might venture into it by water. Even if he escaped the patrols, his appearance at any point would be signalled from one end of Garda to another in a flash. There was a complete signalling system both by night and day. Heliograph, light signals and wireless made surprise impossible.

Once spotted, the raider's life would have been short. There were masked batteries at every point of vantage and many snares. Before the war the Austrians built a number of strong forts round Riva, but the Italians answered them with no more than a certain number of permanent batteries. After the outbreak of hostilities, there sprang up an island fortress, a miniature Cronstadt, very long and low, bristling with gun turrets, and it would have been a brave Austrian who dared to run the gauntlet of its quick firers, although, in point of fact, they were never used. It was a hideous apparition and an amazing contrast to the tranquil beauty of the dark blue lake, which deserves Homer's epithet of "wine-dark," since sometimes its colour is that of the richest Italian wine.

## CHAPTER IV.

### BRITISH TRAINING SCHOOLS.

SINCE the days of Garibaldi there has been a traditional friendship between Italy and England. The bonds that united the two nations were drawn even closer by the coming of the British Expeditionary Force, and to-day the Northern Italians have a personal and intimate affection for the British soldier which will never be forgotten, even when the world-war is a nightmare of the half-vanished past. From the very first the khaki uniform was popular and well received, but rather as something strange and new. German propaganda had been hard at work, trying to persuade the Italians that Great Britain was prolonging the war for its own ends and that the troops sent to Italy would never take any part in the fighting. Then Thomas Atkins arrived with his cheerful smile, fine discipline, and inimitable facility for winning

sympathy and friendship, and the enemy's lies were forgotten.

There was a certain out-of-the-way village in the Euganean Hills through which detachments passed regularly, each detachment staying about three weeks. At first the inhabitants were suspicious and inclined to be surly. They augured no good from such unprecedented happenings. The sudden appearance of huts and barracks, as it seemed out of the ground, the sound of an unknown tongue in their streets and the noise of gun and rifle practice, filled them with alarm. Yet before the week was out they were all smiles and interest and curiosity. They watched the training of our men with round eyes, fraternised with the soldiers, and when each detachment left, turned out to a child to cheer them on their road.

In the midst of some of the most beautiful country in Northern Italy there stands a historic monastery, the Convent of Praglia, an enormous building with endless vaulted corridors and pillared cloisters. Before the war the community had dwindled down to a few old monks, who kept up their huge monastery as best they could, leaving perforce the greater part of their gardens to go to

rack and ruin, and keeping open only so many cells as sufficed for their accommodation. When it was announced that the British army was going to take over the monastery as the headquarters of the Army Schools, the monks were terrified, fearing that everything would be spoilt and pillaged by these savage heretics from Overseas.

They were soon reassured, and a new and absorbing life began for them. All the improvements of which they had dreamed for years made an almost magic appearance. Like children they watched khaki-clad men wandering about their cloisters, repairing, cleaning and giving a fresh life to their gardens, yet at the same time respecting everything that was ancient and beautiful. In a few hours they discovered that the old world of candles and rushlights such as they had always known was no more, and some of them passed hours switching on and off the electric light, which had come mysteriously among them. They watched the soldiers drilling, and grew accustomed to the orders hoarsely shouted in the corridors, once silent and deserted. The gentleness of these foreign men of war so appealed to them that one day they went to the Commanding Officer, and put at his disposal the magnificent





#### GARRISON SPORTS, ITALY

The British Army carried its love of sport into Italy, and many Italians, for the first time, became acquainted with football, boxing and other games. These sports were held near Monte Spineto, where a solitary hermit underwent the same experiences as his brother, described on p. 121, and made many friends among the men who burst in upon his solitude wearing mud-coloured clothes and talking a strange language.



Portrait of Mr. O. H. H.



refectory, with its carved seats and panels and its precious pictures, which was the pride of their hearts. Before, they had kept it jealously locked up, terrified that its beauty should be damaged by careless soldiers. When they had learnt to know the British soldier, they felt that they could offer him nothing less than their best.

On the top of one of the Euganean Hills, almost within sight of Padua, there lived a hermit. His home was a little hut that he had built for himself near an ancient church, perched all alone on the hill-top. He lived on his own produce—he had tilled a small patch of ground—and on the provisions that the peasants brought him from time to time in return for his prayers. For he was a very holy man, and for forty years had never come down from his hill-top. All that he could see of the mighty world was, on the one side, steep wild hills, dotted here and there with a tiny farm house, and on the other, “the waveless plain of Lombardy, bounded by the vaporous air, islanded by cities fair!” It may be doubted if he realised that there was a war.

One day, as he was digging in his garden, he heard a sound such as those solitudes had never

heard, a whistling scream, followed by a heavy explosion. Astonished and not unalarmed, he climbed on the church wall, the boundary of his world, and looked down into the valley below. Beneath him, from the barren hill-side, was rising an unaccountable column of smoke, and as he watched, the strange noise was repeated and a fresh volcano of smoke burst out in the valley. Bewildered, he fled to the church, and only left his prayers when the noise had ceased.

Later his solitude was broken in upon by men wearing mud-coloured clothes and talking a strange language. At first he was frightened of them, but soon from their smiles and signs he learnt that they meant him no harm. They gladly accepted a draught of milk, which was all that he had to offer them, for it was hot work climbing up the steep path to the church, which had once been a pilgrimage. By mysterious means, known only to the British soldier, they made him understand that the sounds he had heard were those of artillery practice in the valley, and that they would come to see him again. He, in his turn, signed courteously that they would be welcome. From that time onwards he had many visitors and became a friend of the British

army, and whenever the guns were firing he might be seen standing on the church wall watching every explosion.

The evolution of warlike methods, which in ancient days was almost as slow as nature, began in modern warfare to move at express speed. Until 1917, almost the entire Italian front consisted of mountains, and just as the fighting in the Vosges was different from fighting in Flanders or Champagne, so in Italy the methods employed were by no means identical with those adopted by us and our French Allies. Unfortunately, at the end of 1917 Italy had lost a portion of her mountain front and found herself called upon to sustain the struggle in the Venetian Plain.

In plain warfare, our experience was able to be of great value to the Italians, just as their knowledge of mountain fighting could convey important lessons to us. In order that our Allies might profit by all that we had learnt, it was decided as soon as we came into Italy to establish schools similar to those existing in France and to keep a certain number of places in them open for Italian officers. In modern conditions war develops so swiftly that training

can never be said to be completed, and our officers and men returned continually to the schools to work through their course and bring their training up to date. The decision to form the schools was taken immediately on our arrival, and was carried out with remarkable expedition.

In the warfare on the Venetian Plain, it was always possible that the use of poison gas might take an extension which it could not take in mountains, where, though the Austrians used gas shells, there was not opportunity for the employment of gas-waves. Before the end of the war the enemy admitted that he regretted having introduced poison gas: in other words, that he was suffering more than we were from his own invention, but such a weapon, horrible as it was, could scarcely be abandoned once it had been introduced, and the enemy had to reap what he had sown.

Admittedly, the British possessed the best existing gas-mask, and their gas drill was a model of its kind. The small box respirator would protect its wearer from poison gas for forty-eight hours, twice as long as the German pattern, and though in appearance it was rather clumsy, it could be adjusted in six seconds. Gas was a



weapon of surprise, and familiarity with the conditions that it produced was the best counter to it. Our gas drill, therefore, aimed at accustoming men to the circumstances of a gas attack. Once the alarm was given the donning of the mask had to become second nature, and men had to be able to fight or work despite its encumbrance.

To inculcate these lessons, night gas-attacks were carried out in the training schools and were made as realistic as possible. The men came up through the trenches as night fell, exactly as if they were a relief advancing in war conditions, greeted by a salvo of supposed gas shells, represented by detonators. They donned their masks and pushed on. After they had passed the danger zone, their officers gave the order "off masks," but just when they reached the front line there came from ahead a hissing as of an enormous snake. It was the warning of something far more deadly than any poison serpent. It was the hissing made by poison gas as it escaped from its cylinders.

Immediately the silence of the night was turned into pandemonium. Rattles, horns, and motor sirens announced that the dreaded gas cloud was approaching. Gas masks were put

on again with the speed that comes from long habit and the stars disappeared in a dense mist of chlorine. For a time one felt as if one were lost in the densest of London fogs, and progress was encumbered for the uninitiated by the difficulty of seeing through the mask. It was hard to believe that the atmosphere outside was loaded with poison, as the air breathed through the mask came fresh and sweet to the lungs. Yet, if the edge of the mask was raised cautiously for the fraction of a second and the air that entered was snuffed up through the nose, freed of the nose clip, the presence of chlorine was at once betrayed by a sickly sweet odour.

While the visitors stumbled blindly over the fields, trying to follow the actions of the men below them in the trenches, the hardened soldiers set to work to dig an extension of the trench line as though the gas mask was nothing more clumsy than a pair of spectacles. For the man who had passed through this mimic gas-attack, German frightfulness had lost most of its terrors, and when the real occasion came they acted as they had been taught automatically.

The Italians were much afraid of gas. The army was full of terrible rumours concerning

the effects of mustard gas or yprite on the Western front. I fancy that these rumours were largely the result of German propaganda, and in any case it was certain that they were liable to have a bad effect on moral. Fortunately the British were able to provide the Italian army with over two million masks, and the mere possession of this preventative gave fresh courage to the Italian soldiers. Their own mask was of rather primitive construction and would not last more than four hours. The gas training in the schools was followed from the very first by officers and rank and file with the greatest interest, and the Italian army undoubtedly gained a great deal of confidence from our instructions. As a matter of fact the enemy in the June offensive used far fewer gas shells than was expected and made no use at all of the gas-wave.

In a training school, the modern battle is split up into its component parts. In the real thing, one generally sees the men come over the top at a leisurely pace and all the detailed organisation of each special arm is lost in the confusion of the battle. One perceives vaguely a line of bursting hand-grenades just ahead of

the first wave, a hundred yards or so further on the barrage of rifle grenades and then the protecting lines of Stokes and trench mortar projectiles. One is vaguely conscious that the bayonet is protecting the special weapons and that the direct fire of the Lewis and machine guns from the flanks is opening a wedge into the enemy's ground for the advancing infantry. Behind, overpowering every other impression, is the terrific background—a vast impenetrable wall of bursting shells.

On the training ground it was possible to realise the close co-ordination of each part of what seemed to be a single gigantic attacking machine. Every weapon had its chosen part to play, and the man who used it had been trained to make the most of its special advantages. Even in modern circumstances the moral element is supreme, and the British based all their training on bayonet drill just as the French found in the hand-grenade the weapon best adapted to their national temperament. In both cases it was not so much the weapon itself that counted as the qualities that its use produced and demanded.

Throughout bayonet training the instructor's main effort was to promote in his pupils lightning

quickness of body and brain, unceasing alertness, and the combative spirit which finds its expression in offensive action. In bayonet practice there entered something of the competitive element which plays so important a part in the public school system. The instructor called his pupils round him in a small circle, and, armed with a ring-stick, would suddenly call one of them out to try and pierce with his bayonet the ring which he kept in perpetual motion. "Go back," he said, if there had been the smallest sign of hesitation, "you are too slow," and he would call on another pupil. Bayonet practice had a particular attraction for the Italian, who has his national school of fencing, and it would be hard to find greater keenness than that shown by a squad of Italian officers whom I watched as they went through this course.

The soldier was never allowed to forget that the bayonet is only a part of the rifle, and that cold steel is only a supplement to the bullet. There is a story that once our men captured a German position, and while the enemy was running away they sent back for more grenades, forgetting that their rifle magazines were full, and that a bullet travels faster than a man can

run. There was no danger of a repetition of this incident, since all training in the bayonet and special weapons was accompanied with rifle practice. When firing fifteen rounds in one minute a marksman could put every bullet on the target at three hundred yards, as was done by one of the instructors at the Praglia, he was not likely to forget the value of the rifle.

Men were perfected in the other close-quarters weapons, grenade and rifle-grenade, and great additional sting was given to the offensive by the introduction of the Stokes mortar, which could keep ten or more bombs in the air at the same time. The flanking fire of Lewis and machine guns is one of the essential elements of modern warfare, and the value of the light portable Lewis gun was well illustrated by a practical trial against an Austrian machine gun, in which it proved its unquestioned superiority. Not least important was the course in the new 8-in. trench mortar, which combined simplicity of construction with very considerable accuracy of fire. The value of the trench mortar was illustrated by a trick the Germans played on the Russian front. They secretly brought up over 800 trench mortars, almost as many as the guns

in the sector. When the attack began these mortars were suddenly unmasked with great effect, and with their range of about a mile, the business of looking after the infantry was entirely given to them, while the artillery concentrated all its efforts on counter-battery work.

After six months in Italy the British and French Expeditionary Forces, without fighting any considerable action, had brought about a remarkable improvement in the situation. As a British General remarked, the Italian army had improved 70 per cent. since the Caporetto disaster. From the material point of view, a continuous defensive line had been re-established and future operations were awaited, both by the Italians and their Allies, with confident optimism.

The part played by the British force, under General Sir Herbert Plumer, in restoring the equilibrium lost at Caporetto, was one of the most satisfactory episodes in the history of the war. The very absence of sensational events on the Italian front was the surest evidence of the recovery of the Italian army and the efficacy of the aid given by the Allies.

In one department the value of the work accomplished by the British forces in Italy was

so remarkable that it deserves special mention. Our flying men had assured to themselves the command of the air in a manner hitherto unprecedented. In the beginning of March, 1918, they had destroyed 64 enemy machines with a loss of eight, and the military importance of this accomplishment was totally unaffected by the enemy's futile bombing of open towns on every occasion when the moon allowed him to kill civilians and destroy civilian property without excessive risk. We held the air from the military point of view, and our airmen deserved all the more credit since they had earned victory in the most difficult country for flying.

On the other hand, the Italian artillery had been brought up to its full strength, and all losses of guns and ammunition had been made up by an admirable national effort. The Italians had in the Spring more men under arms than they had ever had before, and the training of these men had been greatly improved. There had been a general stiffening of the moral attitude of the entire nation, and young Italy had come out of its fiery trial with fresh courage and renewed determination to win.

When the first British troops arrived from





THE COLONEL'S WASHING

VIA CUL DI SACCO RETRONE, VICENZA

A typical Italian courtyard ; sun and shadow on white or tinted walls ; and the gay colour of clothing hung out to dry. In the foreground Tommy is arranging for the convoy of his Colonel's washing.





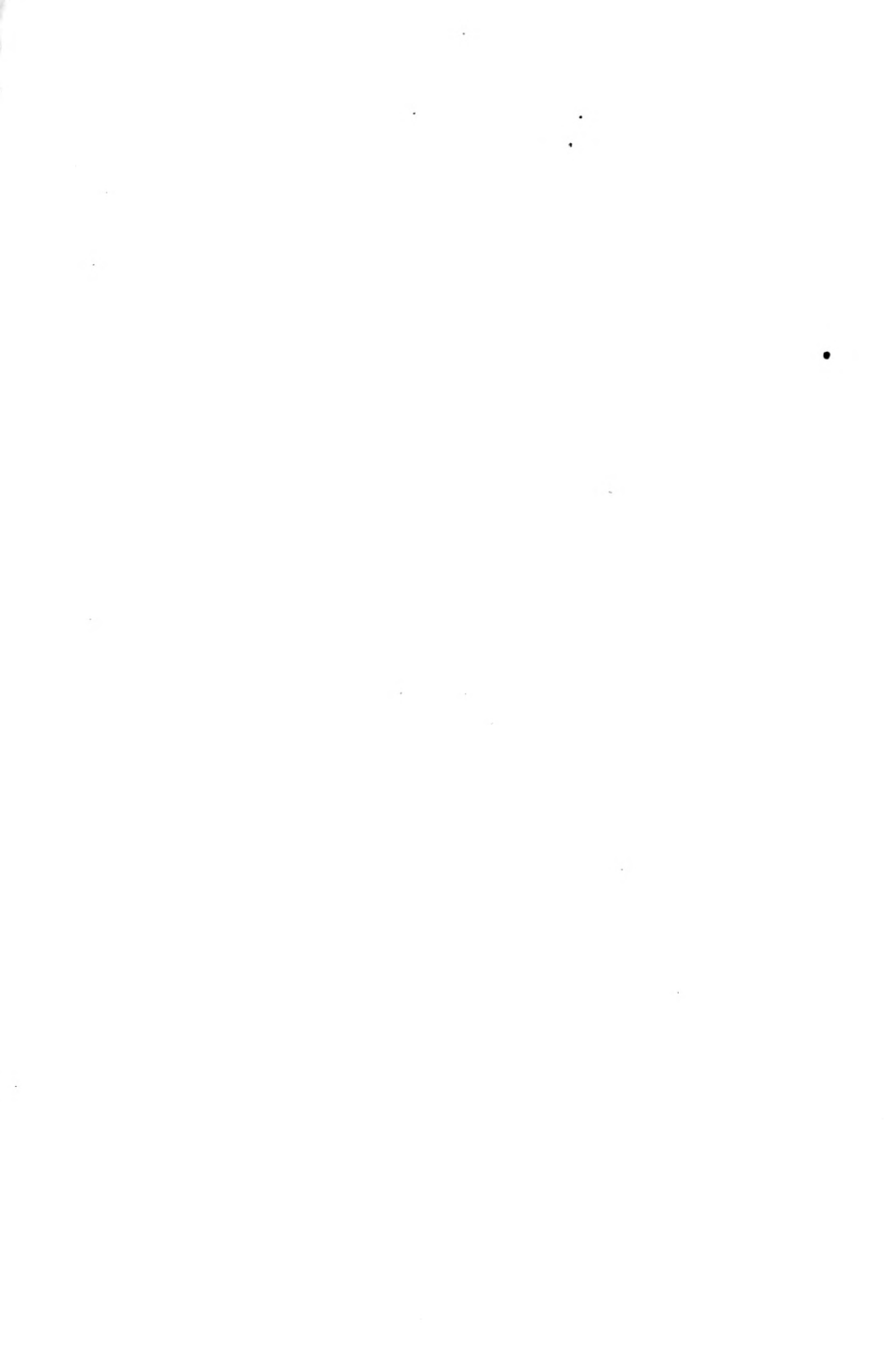
France the position was admittedly very difficult. It was doubtful if the Piave line could be held, and if the enemy was not fated to capture Venice. The first duty of both the French and British expeditions was to prepare for the worst and to put themselves in a position to minimise the results of a possible Italian retirement. With this object they prepared to check the enemy advance on a line that may be called the line of the Euganean Hills, running north and south of the Vicenza.

When it became clear that the Piave front had been stabilised, the Allied Expeditionary Forces prepared to take a more active part in the operations and placed themselves at the disposal of General Diaz, who had succeeded General Cadorna. At that time it became clear that the enemy had abandoned the idea of breaking through on the Piave and was concentrating his efforts on forcing his way down from the mountains to the plain, from the Asiago Plateau and round Grappa. At first it was thought possible that the French and British might take up their positions in the mountain spurs behind these threatened positions, but the British were unequipped for mountain warfare, and it

was considered that they would not be able to stand the hardships of mountain warfare during the winter. Moreover, it was expected that the snow would soon put an end to the enemy's attacks on the mountains.

Consequently, at General Diaz's request, the British took over the Montello sector. The importance of this sector lay in the fact that it was the hinge between the mountains and the Piave front. Here our presence exercised considerable moral influence and materially strengthened the line. German propaganda had sedulously spread the report that the French and British had come to Italy without any intention of going into the line. Thus attempts at sowing distrust were defeated, first by the sending of detachments of British troops into the firing line in the Italian sectors, and later by our occupation of the Montello.

Unhappily the expected snow was very long in making its appearance, and December, 1917, was an anxious month. Under the Austrian pressure the Italians lost a certain amount of ground on the Asiago Plateau and Grappa. It became clear that the German divisions reinforcing the Austrian army were being concentrated in reserve, ready to make the most of a possible



#### THE CANAL AT BATTAGLIA

Battaglia, at the eastern end of the Euganean Hills, was perhaps best known to the British Army as the headquarters of the Paymaster when G.H.Q. moved out of Padua. Three miles from here is Arqua del Monte, where Petrarch lived and died.





To canal at  
Barrage  
near the  
1918.



break through. In consultation with the Italian General Staff, the British and French made all arrangements to block any gap that might be made in the line. They were ready at the shortest notice to take up their position in the lower hills that bar the way from the mountain to the plain. For this manoeuvre all the Staff work was completed, and our Commanders were confident that not only could they check any on-rush but also that they could hurl back the enemy in disorder on the mountains, through which his retreat would have been very difficult. However, eventually the snow came and the combative spirit of the Italian army increased notably. A brilliant French action on Monte Tomba damped the Austrian ardour, and all danger of the enemy reaching the plain disappeared.

Henceforth it was evident that our aid to our friend and ally would for the moment at any rate be rather moral than material. Our presence had produced valuable results, since the existence of veteran reserves in the shape of French and British troops made it possible for the Italian High Command to take measures that it would otherwise scarcely have dared to employ.

Apart from inspiring confidence throughout the country, the British force rendered invaluable services to the Allied Cause by helping to re-organise Italian methods of fighting. The Italian Staff and entire army showed itself ready to make the most of the lessons that we had learnt in three and a half years trench warfare, in which every invention of modern science had been employed. Our officers were able to expound the latest methods of warfare, approved by practice, such as defence in depth, artillery counter-battery work and indirect machine-gun fire. We did much to improve the Italian Intelligence Department, and by converting the Montello into a model sector we gave a practical example to our ally of all that we had learnt at such heavy cost on the fields of Flanders and the Somme.



#### THE AERODROME AT VICENZA

The large aerodrome at Vicenza played an important part in the work of our aircraft on the Italian front.

Over the shed in the centre is seen Palladio's famous Rotunda, and on the left is Monte Berico, where the D.O.M.S. had his headquarters, and where the Press Bureau entertained war correspondents and issued its daily news-sheet for the Army.







## CHAPTER V.

### THE AUSTRIAN OFFENSIVE OF JUNE, 1918.

AFTER the German successes in France in the Spring of 1918, it became certain that the Austrians would attempt an offensive on the Italian front. The Italian nation as a whole was distinctly depressed by the news from France, and was particularly affected by the announcement that the French and British Armies were outnumbered. It was with feelings of considerable apprehension that they awaited the Austrian assault. There were many rumours current that German divisions had been sent to the Austrian front. The Italian entertained an exaggerated notion of the fighting qualities of the German, and seemed to think that all hope of resistance was at an end if he had to face the Boche proper. Such was the effect of Caporetto, where for the first time the Italian troops had some experience of the skill of the German artillery and the excellence of the German infantry.

The British and French military authorities were both convinced that the Austrians would not attempt to force the Piave. They believed that their efforts would be concentrated in the mountain sector, particularly on the Brenta Valley, where they were so near the plain that even a small advance would have enabled them to turn the whole Piave front. To those who were accustomed to countering the well-conceived plans of the German Staff it seemed inconceivable that the enemy could be so ill-advised as to make a serious offensive on the plain when he had everything to gain by attacking in the mountains.

It was in the mountain sector, particularly round the Asiago Plateau, which was then held by the British troops, that the chief preparations were first made to meet the big Austrian attack. Then, however, the Italian Intelligence Department obtained information that the enemy's chief effort would not be against the Asiago Plateau, nor against Grappa, but against the lines behind the Piave. Accordingly, despite the protests of both French and British, the Italians withdrew a large number of their guns from the mountains and brought them up to the Piave positions. Events proved that they were right.



THE VAL D'ASSA FROM THE EDGE OF THE  
ASIAGO PLATEAU

The bridge in the valley to the right was blown up by the Italians on their retreat in 1917. At more than one stage of the war the Asiago Plateau was the scene of severe fighting, in which British troops played an important part. (See pp. 138-147.)





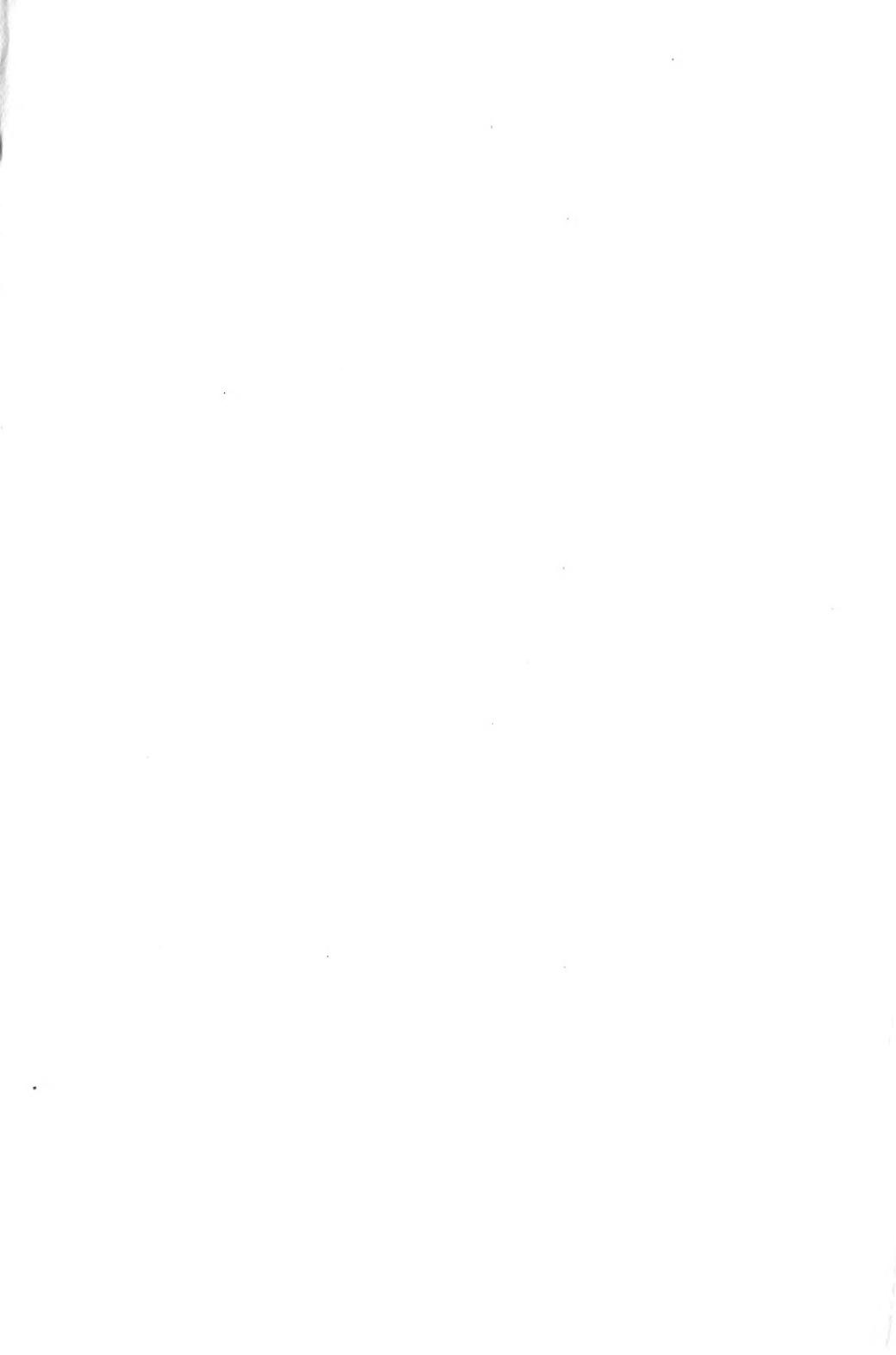
The offensive opened at dawn on June 15th. A day or two before a Slav officer had swam the Piave, having narrowly escaped death at the hands of both the Austrians and the Italians, and brought to the Italians the complete plans of the proposed Austrian attack. On the evening of June 14th I was at British Headquarters, which were then at Lugo, near Thiene, at the point where the foot hills began to rise from the plain. Everything was ready to meet the Austrian assault the next morning, and a sweepstake had been got up as to the exact moment when the attack would begin. The Austrian plans were so well-known that the only question was whether the enemy would keep to the exact hour that he had chosen, and had been kind enough to announce to us. As a matter of fact he kept to that exact hour, and from our point of view nothing could have been better. The incompetency of the Austrian was so great that it seemed almost deliberate. He appeared to go out of his way to tell us what he was going to do.

In the first hours of the morning of June 15th the guns of the Allies all along the line from the Asiago front and from the Montello to Venice

opened a tremendous fire on the enemy first-line trenches. These trenches were crammed with men waiting for the assault, and our fire must have wrought havoc among them. I was sleeping at Padua that night, and the violence of the bombardment was almost comparable to that of the Somme battle. Heavy firing, however, only lasted a few hours, and during the rest of the offensive, except on the French and British fronts, the artillery played a comparatively small part in the operations. It was amazing to find oneself in the centre of what was presumably a big battle and see only a few stray shells bursting here and there.

The Austrian offensive was made on a very wide front. Strictly speaking it was not a general offensive as understood in the past, but rather a series of attacks delivered at widely distant points, which varied from the eastern end of the Asiago Plateau to the western reaches of the Piave. These attacks were delivered at different hours and seemed to be based on the idea that the successes recently obtained by the Germans in France were due to surprise. The enemy evidently thought that a number of attacks distributed over a considerable area might blind





ENEMY DUG-OUTS ON THE NORTH BANK  
OF THE PIAVE

This shows the north bank of the Piave, rising a few feet above the shingle of the river-bed, after our victorious troops had crossed at Grave di Papadopoli. The dug-outs were carelessly and insecurely made, with nothing like the strength which the Germans would have given to a front position of such vast importance.





us to the point at which the real offensive was to be driven home.

Unfortunately for the Austrian he had done everything in his power to make surprise impossible. As the event proved, he had not enough men to attempt so ambitious a scheme, and his attacks frittered themselves away without making any considerable impression on the Italian lines.

At the beginning of the battle there was no fear of the Italians erring on the side of overconfidence. They had made up their mind that they were going to be driven back, and cheerfully announced that Treviso would be lost on the first day, and that a day or two later the enemy would be in Padua. Some of the Italian officers, who saw the spirit with which our men were waiting for the battle, were amazed at what they regarded as our lack of sympathy. They could not understand the state of mind of a man who could take part in a sweepstake on so serious an affair as an enemy offensive. The Italian attitude was largely influenced by the terrible tales of mustard gas which were current and were only partly counteracted by the issue of the British mask. However, the Italian soldier was

absolutely determined to wipe out the disgrace of Caporetto, and it needed only the encouragement of the first day's resistance to restore all his confidence.

On the first day the British sector on the Asiago Plateau received its due share of attention from the enemy. The Austrians paid our men several compliments. In the first place they kept their battery emplacements opposite our lines concealed in what can only be described as a desperate manner. For days past our guns had been making the life of the enemy infantry in the front line trenches a perfect misery. Each day so many yards of trenches were blown to pieces, and when at night the enemy sought to repair the damage and replace the barbed-wire he found that machine-guns had been carefully trained by daylight on the point where his working parties would be engaged.

The results from the Austrian point of view were disastrous. To the vigorous firing of our batteries the enemy refused to reply for fear of exposing his guns to counter-battery work, and the effect of this abstention on his infantry can be imagined. Nothing destroys the moral of the infantry more thoroughly than the idea

that the enemy is shelling them without being shelled in his turn. In the second place the enemy paid the British troops the compliment of attacking them with men brought up in the greatest secrecy and hurry. In the sector of the British front the attack was made by a division brought up during the night in motor lorries from a point some fifteen miles away in the Trentino.

The Austrians hoped to take the British unawares by suddenly throwing in to the line a division of excellent troops composed mainly of Austro-Germans with a sprinkling of Bosnians, who had not suffered like the men in the line from our merciless artillery. It was an arduous task to bring up these men in darkness across mountain roads, and the results achieved were far from compensating the enemy for his trouble.

Shortly before the Austrian attack, the British had been preparing to make a partial offensive themselves on the Asiago Plateau. Lord Cavan was then in command and a fighting general par excellence, he was extremely anxious to come to hand grips with the enemy. In preparation for the attack a number of batteries had been advanced and ammunition dumps

accumulated in proximity to the enemy. The British attitude to the Austrian soldier was shown by the fact that a number of guns and dumps were actually in No-Man's-Land, well in advance of our front line trenches. Against the German proper we should hardly have ventured to be so audacious, though it is true that the French immediately before the battle of the Malmaison stationed in their first lines a number of 75s without attracting the enemy's attention.

When it became unnecessary to attack the Austrians since they were kind enough to attack us, the British offensive was abandoned. At the end of the bombardment the enemy infantry left its trenches and swept over No-Man's-Land. The guns and ammunition in advance of our trenches necessarily fell into the Austrians hands, but characteristically enough they made nothing of this capture. Before evening the enemy had been driven back to his trenches and we recovered all the guns and shells that we had lost. The Austrians had made no attempt to destroy our dumps while they were in their power, and they had no time to carry away our guns.

The enemy came on in a leisurely kind of way





#### THE CHURCH, ASIAGO

For months and months the British gunners on the Asiago Plateau poured shells into Asiago. Though the outer walls of the church still stand, the interior is a mass of ruins.





as though he expected that all our men had been killed, and he was very much surprised at the storm of machine-gun and rifle fire, informing him that our trenches were still being held in force. The right of the British sector was being held by the 23rd Division, and here the attack simply melted away before it reached the lines.

On the left the Austrians were rather more successful against the 48th Division. They managed to squeeze through along the track of the railway line that runs from Asiago to Schio. Here there was a ravine that pierced our line, offering a certain amount of cover, and the attacking infantry, rushing forward and forming a very narrow salient, were able to reach wooded ground. In these mountain districts, the woods only a few hundred yards behind our front lines had not been destroyed by bombardment to any extent comparable to the forest destruction in France.

This small success was won by the division which had been rushed from the rear in motor lorries. It was this division to which the main assault was entrusted. It attacked on a narrow front with a great depth of waves, and the enemy

hoped that it would pierce our lines and occupy the hilly ground in the rear. It was to be relieved when it reached its second objective by another division. The second division came up to perform this duty, but found, instead of a hole in our lines, the bulk of the first division retiring in disorder. The inevitable confusion resulted, and our artillery made the most of it.

So far as the salient along the railway line was concerned, the enemy had walked into a trap. Tempted by the possibility of working his way down the protected ravine he found himself in a barbed-wire cage, specially prepared beforehand for this eventuality. The Austrian troops engaged showed no capacity for profiting by a small success such as the Germans always showed. Instead of trying to establish themselves strongly in the ground they had gained, and extending their advantage on their flanks, they appeared to have been dismayed at finding barbed-wire unexpectedly. The Austrian Command made no effort to push the attack home after they had once been held up. Suddenly the order came to retreat all along the line, and all the Austrian divisions engaged retired in a more or less disorderly mass to

their own trenches. The British guns shelled them heavily, as retreating uphill and in full view they offered a splendid target. Then all along the line the British infantry charged. It was in its way a remarkable charge, not so much because it captured several hundred prisoners and accounted for a good many more Austrians, but because, so far as could be ascertained by the Commander-in-Chief, not a man in the attacking force was either killed or wounded.

The enemy left in the hands of our men all the guns that had been temporarily in his possession, and, as already stated, he had spared our ammunition. A few Austrian detachments tried to dig trenches in No-Man's-Land, and by evening this was the greatest extent of their success. Our men collected a big booty of rifles and a few small guns used to accompany the infantry.

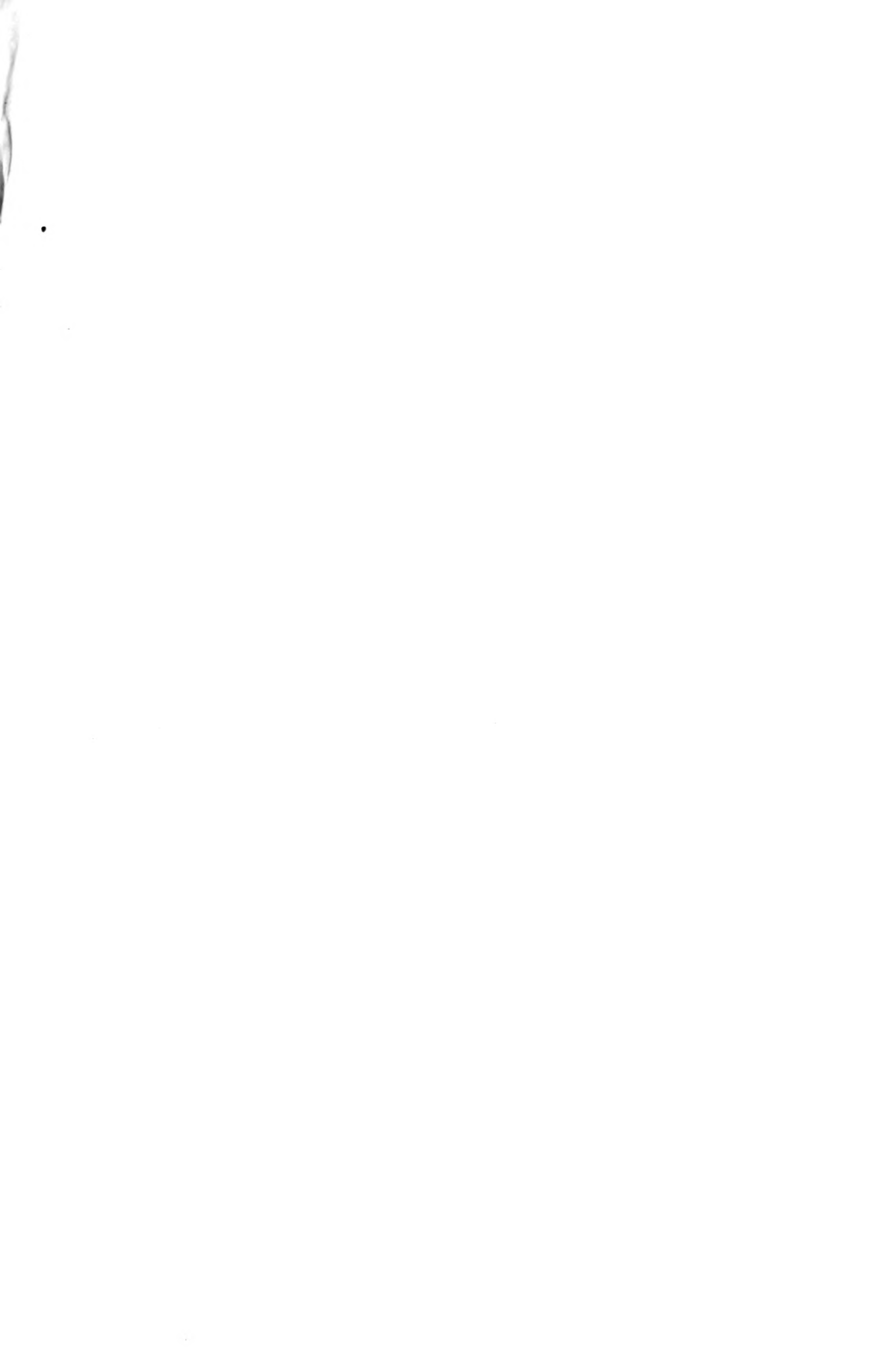
On the evening of the 15th the British were able to send the Italian High Command the joyful news that all was well on their front. They had lost a thousand men and the enemy's losses could be reckoned at five or six times that number. The success was particularly praiseworthy because of the two divisions in line nearly 6000 men were in hospital with influenza.

The Italians on their side put up a gallant defence all along the line. The Austrians failed to gain any military advantage in the mountains. Their efforts to pass down the Brenta Valley—where success would have been particularly valuable to them, since once they reached the plain they threatened the communications of the entire Piave front—proved altogether fruitless, and they did no more than occupy a few outlying posts, most of which were promptly wrested from them by well-conducted counter-attacks.

There could be no doubt that the Brenta Valley was one of the main Austrian objectives. Our aeroplanes reported throughout the day that long lines of reinforcements were pouring up along the mountain ridges. The Austrians hoped to reach the plain on the first, or at latest on the second day, and had they done so a retirement from the Piave would automatically have become necessary. As it was they found themselves on the beginning of the second day nearly back again in their own lines. Even the difficult salient of Solarola which jutted out north of Grappa was held by the Italians.

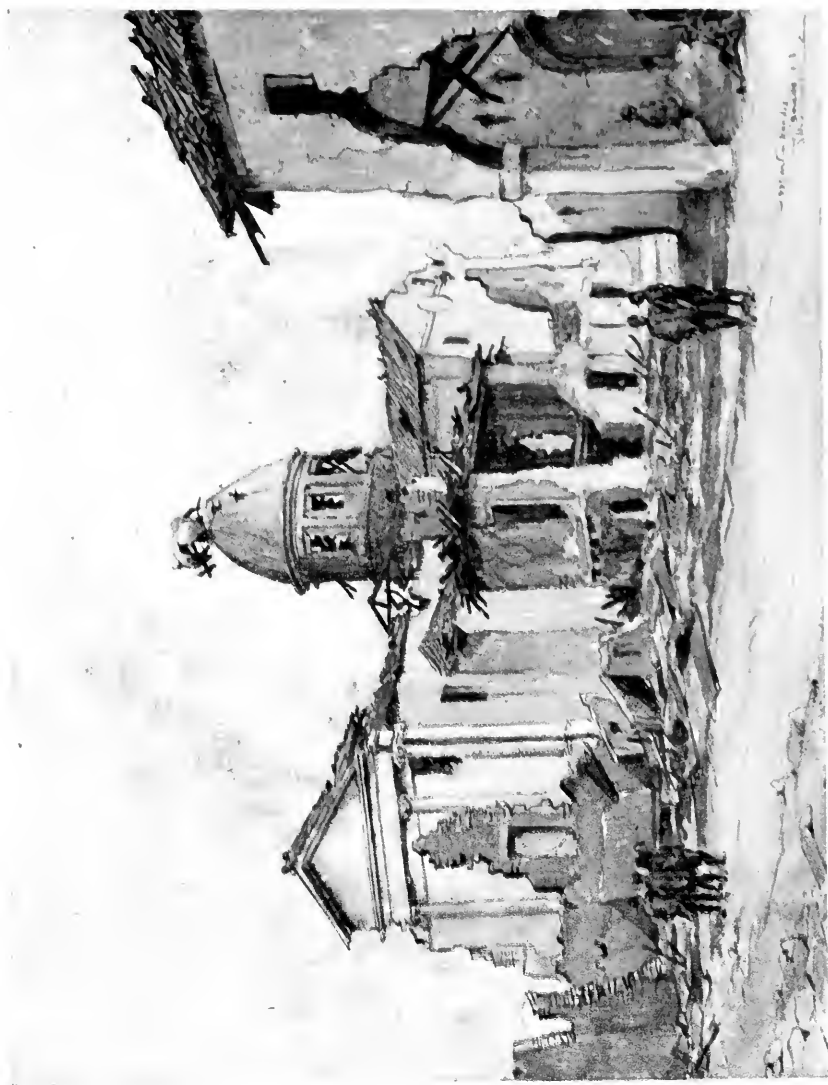
The most important fighting on the left bank of the Brenta took place on Col Moschin, a great





#### THE CHURCH, SPRESIANO

Spresiano, almost in the British front line on the Piave, was badly damaged by shell fire.





grey bluff that rises steeply to 4000 ft. and commands the bend of the Brenta at Valstagna. For a short time the enemy succeeded in wresting this important position from the Italians, but a counter-attack conducted with great dash recovered it and restored the line. The splendid resistance of the batteries on this position deserves special mention. The gun-crews defended their positions against all attacks until they were rescued by a counter offensive. The fall of the Col Moschin might have necessitated a rectification of the line further east, and in Austrian hands it would have rendered the defence of the southern end of the Brenta Valley far more precarious.

On the west of the Brenta the enemy gained some ground in the Frenzela Valley, but every position that he took was stoutly contested, and again and again his efforts were defeated by counter-attacks. On the left the French, who were between the Italians and the British, held their positions practically intact.

On the Piave the enemy met with a slightly greater measure of success; his mass attacks supported by heavy artillery fire enabled him to obtain a footing on the further bank of the river

at several points, notably on the eastern corner of the Montello at Nervesa and further south in the Fagare-Musile districts. This advance was met by the Italians with a series of immediate counter-attacks, and despite continued pressure the enemy was at several points driven into the river, with the result that the ground held by him on our side of the Piave was reduced to mere bridge-heads. There was much hard fighting all along this line. The enemy came across first in boats, and then, if he succeeded in establishing a footing, tried to throw gangways supported by boats across the stream.

The Austrian losses in this fighting must have been very heavy. They had to run the gauntlet not only of the Italian artillery, which, whether owing to shortage of ammunition or some other cause was scarcely as effective as it should have been, but also of a combined fleet of aeroplanes. The Piave is a stream of many currents and shallows and the enemy boats were always running aground. The Austrians as they struggled across were received by a storm of bullets from the further shore; many boats were sunk and the men swept away by the rapid stream. From certain positions, such as the high embankment



RUINS OF THE CASTLE, SAN SALVATORE  
DI SUSEGANA

This splendid summer palace of Count Antonio di Collalto is now a mass of ruin. Its tower formed the principal Austrian observation post for a long stretch of the Piave, and was constantly shelled from the Montello and other parts of the front.







that runs along the river below Nervesa, the Italians commanded the river from above and poured in their volleys at point-blank range. Here and there, however, the enemy was slightly screened by the banks of the winding river. It was at these points that the most desperate efforts were made.

Often a boatload or two seemed to have got through, and the Austrians were on the point of scrambling ashore when there would come a loud buzzing and a roar. Like a falcon an aeroplane would suddenly sweep down from behind the Italian front, and the men helpless in the water would be riddled by the fire of its machine-gun, while a bomb would explode among the Austrians, still in the boat, trying frantically to bring it ashore. These Austrian boats supplied our airmen such targets as submarine hunters well might envy, and both Italian and British aviators made the most of their opportunities. One British aviator, who was bombing an Austrian bridge, unloaded all his bombs and then hurled his spare parts and tools at the Austrians who were struggling across.

This wild battle between air and river went on for several days. The British machines, after

two hours' good work in the morning, having accounted for seven enemy machines and two kite balloons on the Asiago Plateau, besides making most useful observations, were prevented by the weather from further flying in their own sector. At first our airmen were terribly disappointed at being unable to display on the day of battle their supreme superiority over the enemy aviators, but to their great satisfaction there came in the morning an order to send all available machines to the Piave to sink the enemy's boats, and blow up such bridges as he had been able to establish. From that time on they had plenty to do and did great execution in co-operation with the Italian airmen.

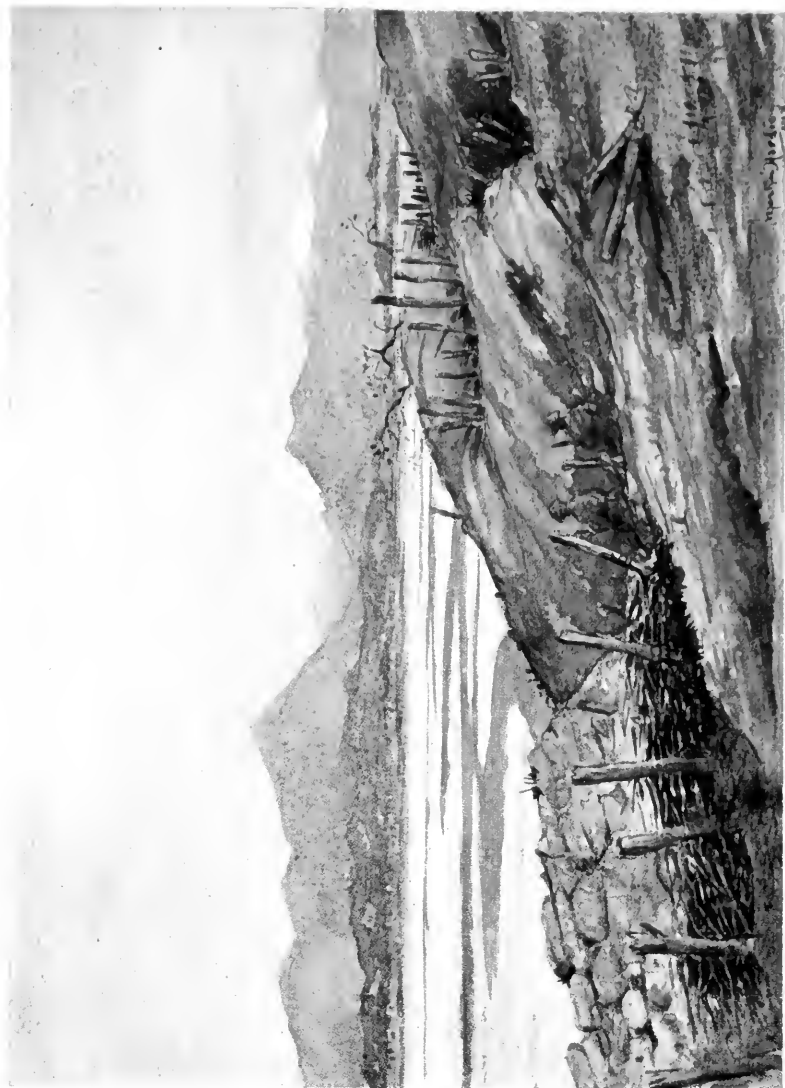
The enemy's main objective on the Piave front was the town of Treviso, which he had hoped to reach on the first day of his offensive. It was his intention to drive a great triangular wedge into the Italian position with its apex at Treviso. All he succeeded in accomplishing was the formation of a bridge-head on the Montello and bridge-heads of less importance in the Mid-Piave area. On the Montello the enemy succeeded in crossing the river at a point opposite Falze di Piave. Thence he worked his way southwards and took



FRONT-LINE TRENCHES ON THE MONTELO,   
OVERLOOKING THE PIAVE

The grey-blue water of the Piave glides down peacefully between the broad shoals which, with their yellow pebbles, seem the most important part of the stream that is often 2000 yards across, counting shoals and channels together. It appeared too tranquil and gentle to be a military barrier checking a barbarian on-rush on the fairest country in Europe.

Before they were driven back, the Austrians in their great offensive of June, 1918, occupied two-thirds of the Montello. (See pp. 24-47, 152-157.)







the Italian position at Nervesa on the flank, at the same time spreading over the eastern edge of the ridge. His object was sufficiently clear. From the Montello, the Italians could enfilade the Piave Valley and make any crossing impossible in this district either above or below, so that the enemy was doomed to failure so long as the Italians held this commanding ground.

The enemy succeeded in capturing some two-thirds of the Montello, but all his plans were shattered by the sudden rise of the river. The Piave came thundering down in a flood from the mountains and swept away all the bridges, so that for several days the forces on the Italian side of the Piave were practically deprived of communications. The Italians had a great opportunity. Had they attacked in force they should have accounted for the whole of the Austrian troops that had crossed the river. Unfortunately, overpowered by the extent of their success they were afraid of taking any risks, and instead of carrying out a counter-offensive on a considerable scale as they might have done, they adopted the system called by the French the system of "petits paquets." They engaged their men battalions at a time, instead of throwing

in whole divisions as the British urged them to do; and though they checked the Austrian advance and eventually drove it back across the Piave, they failed to win the great military success which was almost within their grasp. If they had made one great effort there is little doubt that their losses would have been far lighter than they actually were.

When the Austrians were holding the Montello, I spent the morning on the edge of the foot-hills that run from Asolo to the river, just above Cornuda. The Piave, swollen by recent rains, swept round the bend with rapid currents, separated by wide sand-banks against which the stream broke in white foam, and as far as the eye could see, that is to say as far as Falze, no bridge had resisted the flood. The shores of the river were strewn with wreckage, and a line of posts emerging from the torrent showed where an Austrian bridge had once been. On this reach of the river the Austrians ought not to have succeeded in establishing any gangway, since it was enfiladed by Italians from the point where I was standing. The hills round me, with their wooded ravines, offered ideal emplacements, and it was surprising to find that there was not a single



#### TOMMY AT TREVISO

One is looking out on the piazza from the shadows of the colonnade under the town hall. At the time of the final advance, Treviso lay half-way between G.H.Q. and the British front line.





gun in position. The idea that a great battle was in progress seemed ridiculous. It might have been a quiet day on the French front. The Italian artillery was firing fitfully from positions in the plain behind the Montello. The gunners' chief interest seemed to lie in the islands just opposite Cornuda, where their counter-attacks had already recovered some ground. As to the Austrian guns, they seemed to have abandoned the men across the river to their fate. They fired a perfunctory round every ten minutes and that was all.

Just where the river narrows above Falze I saw through the glasses a black object put off from the Austrian shore. From where I was standing it would have made a perfect target for a field-gun, and if there had been a battery there its fate would have been sealed in a minute or two. As I was lamenting the absence of this battery, an Italian aeroplane suddenly appeared round the bend of the river, flying very low. At once the black object returned to the Austrian shore. The aeroplane gave a signal, rose, and darted off on other business. The batteries behind the Montello began to give tongue, and the water in the neighbourhood was thrown

up in enormous fountains as the shells exploded. Nothing was to be seen of the floating object that had attracted our attention. It was against the bank, waiting until the airmen had gone and the salvo was over. It was poor shooting at a difficult target. The Italians had to fire over the Montello, and most of their shells went wide. If they had had a single 75 enfilading the river they could have done the business with half-a-dozen shells.

The Italian gunners stopped firing, doubtless supposing that they had accomplished their object, and out came the black object again. It could be nothing else than a large ferry boat, which was held up against the current by a cable, and was being painfully pulled across the Piave. At a guess, it might carry 50 men. Its slow progress showed eloquently the difficulties with which the enemy had to contend in maintaining himself across the river. The Italian gunners woke up again to its presence. From time to time the ferry came to a halt against the sand-banks and its progress was marked by shell bursts. Columns of water rose on its right and left, and the men on board must certainly have been drenched and perhaps a splinter or two went



home. Then shrapnel began to burst over it, and still it went slowly on. For the observer it was simply maddening. A single well-directed shot would have put the ferry out of action, but bad management and bad luck were on our side. After much toil and agony the ferry came to land under the steep banks of the Montello, where it was sheltered from the Italian batteries in the plain, though it was still exposed to any gun in the hills where I was standing.

Further east the most important bridge-head established by the enemy was that of Musile, opposite San Donà di Piave. Here fighting was of a very confused nature, and the Italian gunners took no great part in the proceedings except so far as they occasionally shelled the bridges on the further bank. The Italian infantry displayed great bravery in very trying circumstances, and it must be said they had reason to complain of the way in which they were led. The Italian army paid a heavy penalty for all the developments of modern plain fighting that it had not yet learnt. Like the Americans later in the Argonne, the Italian troops which counter-attacked failed to keep the artillery informed of their position, and consequently had to depend

on the bayonet and the knife. It was very difficult ground for fighting—a plain as flat as a billiard table, thickly overgrown, with no observation post higher than low pollard trees. The Austrian had got no guns across the river, apart from a few 1½ in. guns intended to accompany the infantry in the assault, but they were well provided with machine-guns. At this time the Austrian offensive had lost all its sting, and the enemy, cut off from the further bank, was fighting with his back against the river, desperately struggling to maintain his position. The Italians engaged a battalion at a time and charged across ground so heavily overgrown that a man could not see ten yards in front of him. Machine-guns concealed in ditches all masked by the high corn had to be rushed and carried by frontal attack. It is small wonder that the Italians lost 90,000 men in repelling the Austrian offensive. Had their army been trained in modern fighting they would have had half the casualties and more than double the success.

Eventually the Austrians succeeded in establishing bridges and communications with the further bank, but the fighting spirit had gone out of them. They used their communications not to reinforce

the men in line but to withdraw their forces. To the credit of the enemy it must be said that he accomplished this difficult feat. His rear-guards held up the Italians until the bulk of his troops were across the river.

After the collapse of the Austrian offensive great pressure was placed on the Italian Government and High Command by the Allies to undertake in their turn an offensive on a large scale. It was hoped that a victory on the Italian front might relieve the pressure in France. The Italian High Command, however, refused to attempt any ambitious operation. It was probably right in its decision, as its reserves were used up and vast preparations were required before the army could undertake offensive operations on a large scale. Immediately after the Austrian retreat, however, a small counter-offensive was opened which resulted in the recovery of the ground that lies between the old and new Piave. It may be questioned whether this operation was very politic. It was costly, and though successful really made no great change in the situation. However, it increased the confidence of the Italian army and put Venice well beyond the reach of the enemy.

The fighting in this district resembled that along the line of the Flanders floods. In Flanders, where the artillery of the opposing sides was far more formidable than in Italy, operations on any considerable scale in the flooded area were regarded as impossible until the general position elsewhere on the French front had made a German retreat inevitable. In Italy, where circumstances of warfare were very different, the Duke of Aosta's army succeeded in driving the Austrians from positions which were almost impregnable owing to the strength of their natural defences.

The enemy had adopted on a smaller scale the "pill-box" system of defence. The Italian action consisted in a methodical reduction of small centres of resistance and machine-gun nests. The only points above water were the lines of a few roads, canals, dykes and some scattered houses and farms. Often to obtain command of the marshes the enemy hoisted his machine-guns into trees, and the problem for the Italians was to ascertain their exact position. When bullets are hailing down from the air it is no easy matter to judge the precise spot in a line of small trees from which they are coming. When, however, our Allies had located the tree in which the

machine-gun was posted, every man took such cover as he could find and kept down the enemy fire with rifles. Meantime bodies of men pushed forward, tried to surround the Austrian position and get within hand-grenade range. Eventually the machine-gun would be silenced by the opening of fire in its rear.

The enemy troops fought most stubbornly. They were stout soldiers from Bosnia and Herzegovina, who were originally enrolled for service in the sands of Palestine, but who now found themselves, through stress of circumstances, engaged in the uncongenial mud of the Adriatic lagoons. Soldiers of small intelligence, most of them fanatic Moslems, wearing the badge of the Crescent, they resisted valiantly, playing a losing game with great courage.

There was also "a Company of Death," composed of Viennese who had sworn to conquer or die. They wore black uniforms with the skull and cross-bones, and despite their rather theatrical clothes most of them were true to their oath.

Against them were Italian Arditi, special shock troops, who wore under the tunic a grey jersey, and carried at the belt the short stabbing knife dear to the heart of the southern Italian. They

were men of small stature, very active, and they went into battle singing. At their side were the Bersaglieri, with cock's plumes in their helmets, whose ordinary marching step before the war was the double. They had little chance on this ground of showing their superior mobility, but they fought like demons. Nearer the sea the Naval Brigade found itself in its element. Barges and motor boats brought up reinforcements into the line along the canals and provided advance posts with ammunition.

The enemy was seriously handicapped by the insecurity of his communications across the new Piave. He had a wooden bridge and four gangways, but the Italian guns destroyed the bridge and made all passage across the gangways most perilous. In the neighbourhood of these gangways, the river bank was torn in pieces by shell-holes, and the landscape to some extent recalled that of the Yser canal.

The battle was necessarily a soldier's battle. The combat against endless machine-gun nests, arranged to secure a flanking fire, split itself up into a series of isolated episodes. Along the dykes and embankments the line of advance was well defined, but continually the troops,

swept by bullets from every direction, had to plunge down from the raised ground and attack across the floods. The men up to their waists in water still struggled on and encouraged their companions, and once within range the Italian grenades gave the machine-guns short shrift. Some of the Arditi had armed themselves with leaping poles, and with their aid swung themselves over the barbed wire entanglements, of which the posts alone arose above the flood. It was such fighting as Hereward the Wake carried on against William the Conqueror in the Fen country.

## CHAPTER VI.

### AVIATION.

WHEN we first arrived in Italy we were amazed and delighted to find that the towns near the front were not thrown into absolute darkness. The lamps, though they had been painted dark blue, still gave a sufficiency of light, and threw a fairy-like radiance on the arcaded streets of the ancient towns. After nights in Belfort, Nancy, Châlons, Amiens, Dunkirk, it was a real pleasure to walk about after dinner in Verona or Padua. There was no apparent danger of aeroplane raids. I remember one evening when the moon was high and the sky was as black as only the Italian sky can be, that several of us felt that things were too good to last. We were walking in Padua, not forty miles from the enemy's lines, and there were three General Headquarters in the town. It seemed too much to hope that the enemy could long resist the temptation of bombing us.





#### PADUA FROM THE VICENZA ROAD

There was often a long string of Army lorries, cars and transport held up at a railway crossing a mile out of Padua on the way from Vicenza to G.H.Q. (See pp. 164-171.) Those who took advantage of the enforced delay to climb a mound on the right were repaid by this view of Shelley's "many-domed Padova"—superb in twilight with its low tones of silver-grey and madder.



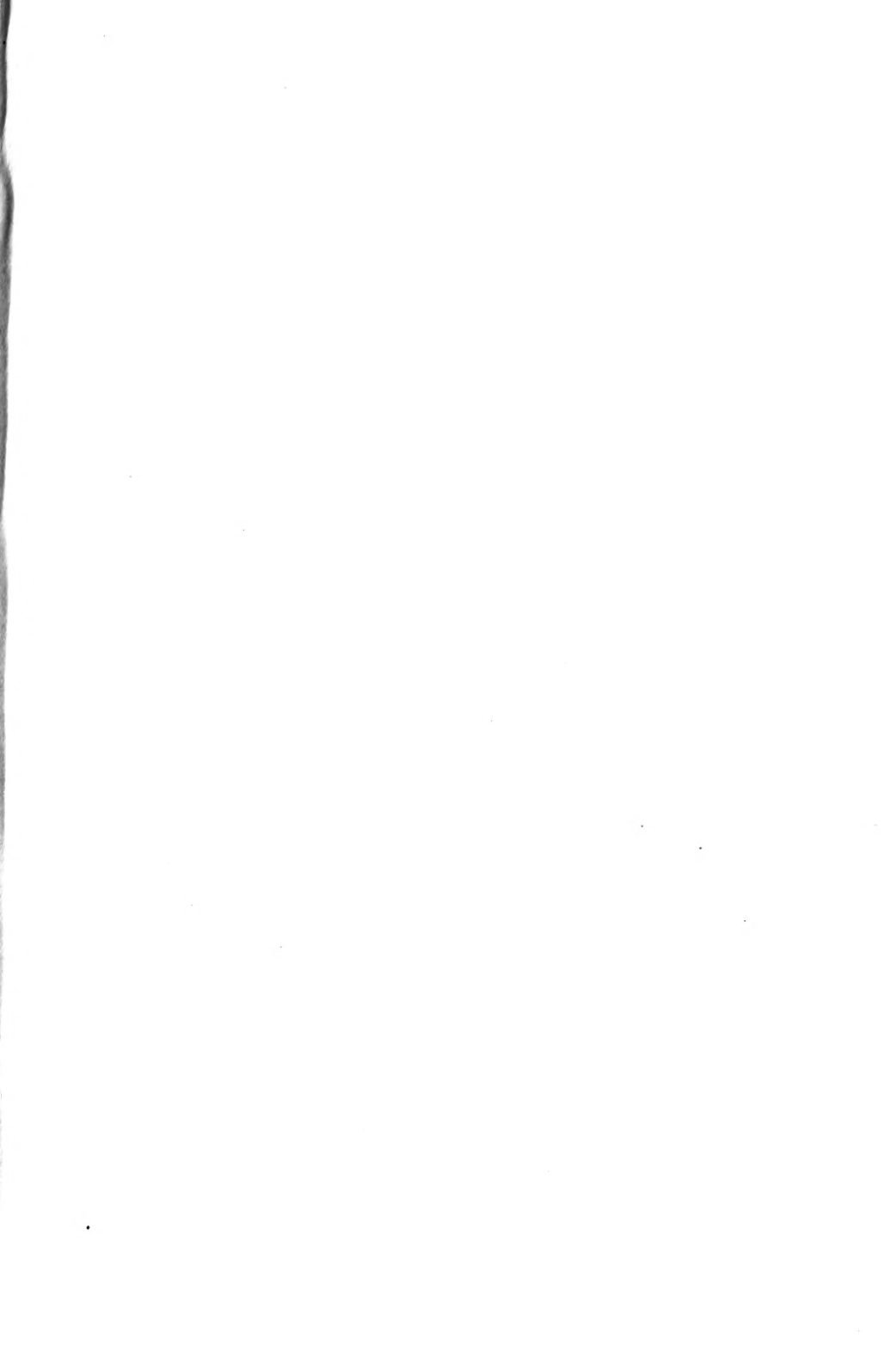


On Boxing Day the Austrian aviators gave us an amusing demonstration of their quality, which certainly did not increase our respect for them. In the early morning the alarm was given that twenty or thirty Austrian machines were preparing to attack our lines. The British and Italian aviators went up and the anti-aircraft guns got to work. Then a scene unprecedented in the annals of military aviation took place. The aeroplanes began to fall, some of them in flames, on all sides, much to the astonishment both of the aviators and the anti-aircraft gunners. No less than eleven of them crashed in a comparatively small area, and the people in Montebelluna, who watched the attack, could only suppose some miracle had happened. This fine bag was the cause of bitter disputes between the gunners and the airmen, as each party claimed to have disposed of all the enemy aeroplanes.

The truth of this curious incident was divulged by the capture of a couple of aviators. They explained that on Christmas night the Austrian aviators had had a great dinner, and that after dinner some misguided person had suggested that they should go and bomb the accursed British. They were in a mood for any idiocy.

Many of the pilots started in a condition that, to put it mildly, was not a fit condition for flying, and the result was that the drunkest of them crashed their machines themselves, while others, flying at a ridiculously low height, were easily brought down. We laughed heartily in Padua at this Austrian effort behind the line. We did not know then that a German bombing squadron had arrived to reinforce the Austrian airmen.

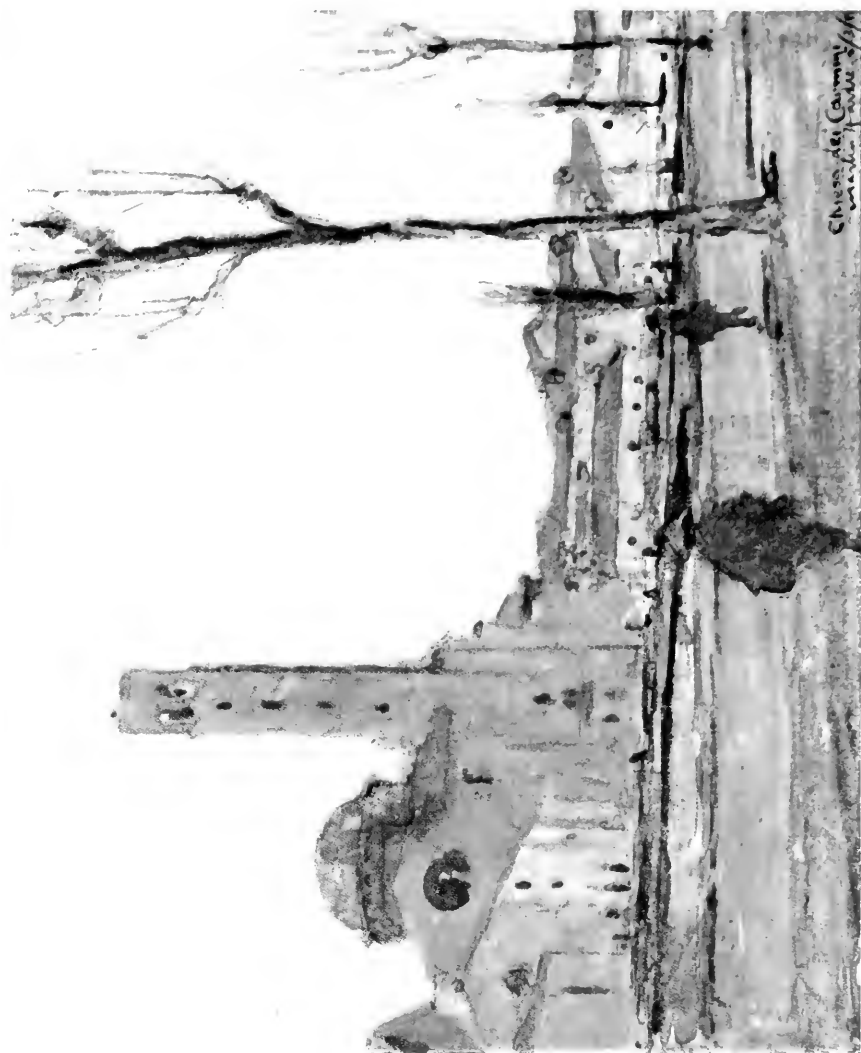
On the night of December 28th I was dining at a Paduan restaurant, called the Isola di Caprera, an unpretending little place, with excellent cuisine. Just at the end of dinner there came a tremendous explosion and the window above my head burst into fragments, and all the lights went out simultaneously. There were at least two hundred people in the restaurant, and in some mysterious way they had all of them disappeared into the cellar without a sound by the time I had lighted a match. Meantime we could hear the bombs dropping further and further away across the town, and then the anti-aircraft guns got to work with considerable hubbub. How it was that we knew only a few minutes after the first bomb had dropped that two



#### THE CHIESA DEI CARMINI, PADUA

In the winter of 1917 Padua, at that time British H.Q., was systematically bombed by enemy aircraft. His biggest success was the dropping of an incendiary bomb on the Chiesa dei Carmini. Both the dome and the neighbouring red-brick campanile were badly damaged. (See pp. 167-169.)







British officers had been killed just near the tower in which Galileo was once confined was a mystery, but know it we did and unfortunately it was true.

The Germans contented themselves with one raid that night, and they did a lot of damage. No alarm was given until after the first bomb fell, and then all the lights of the town were cut off. One bomb fell in the Piazza just outside the big Storione Restaurant and killed and wounded a number of people, leaving the pavement covered with pools of blood. The Germans were doing good shooting. One bomb fell on a house at the corner of British Headquarters, and had it been a little later would probably have accounted for several officers of General Plumer's Staff, as they would have been just returning from dinner.

The next night the enemy got to work again, but this time the alarm was given and there were fewer victims. His biggest success was the dropping of an incendiary bomb on the Church of the Carmine. The enemy reckoned with reason that the people of Padua, warned by experience would take cover as soon as the danger was signalled, and that consequently

his high explosive bombs would have less chance of mowing down the civil population, so his airmen were on this occasion mainly equipped with incendiary bombs. The main dome of the Carmine Church was set afire, and its flames lit a whole quarter of the town with the red flare of disastrous conflagration. It seemed that the old days of riot, murder and fire had returned to Padua and that Ezzelino had been born again.

The dome had been transfigured into a glory of fire. The bomb had done its work well, and all the wooden supports that had held up the leaden roof for centuries were blazing fiercely. In the midst of the furnace the Cross still stood, bearing up bravely the emblem of Christianity, beside the red-brick Campanile, which in the moment of the tragedy seemed to have gained the soaring grace and likeness of the Torre del Giglio at Sienna, the most beautiful Tower in the world. In front of the Church there was a canal, and watching from the bridge one saw the dome reflected like a golden palace of pleasure in the faintly rippling water. It was Coleridge's dream :

"The shadow of the dome of pleasure  
Floated midway on the waves."

But the thought had hardly formed when the

greedy crackling of the flames brought one back to the grim reality. A low moan went up from the watching crowd as the Cross itself collapsed into the fiery brazier. Through the flames the inner roof of domed stone, blackened with the smoke, held inexorably against the heat. Burning brands had fallen on the red tiles of the roof of the nave, but the fire did not spread.

The fire must have lit up the country for miles round. In its unnatural light the low houses of Padua, with their deep arcades brightly illuminated and narrow tortuous alleys plunged into sudden darkness, seemed a scene in a theatre set for a Renaissance tragedy. "Pagheranno," (they shall pay), was the word often repeated by the crowd which watched the ruin of the old familiar monument.

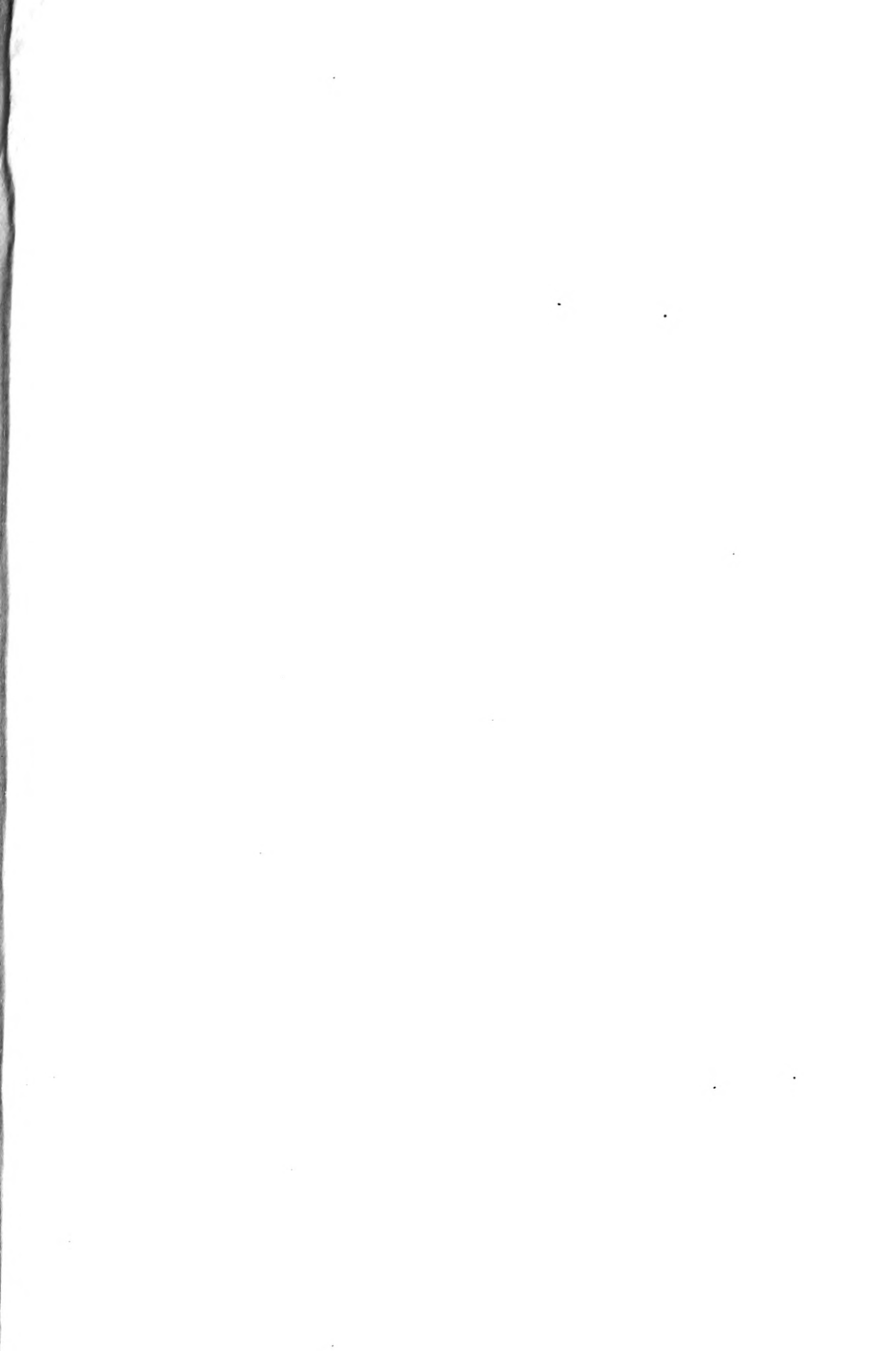
Another incendiary bomb had fallen just outside the French General Headquarters. It had failed to take fire, and from the bits of it I picked up that night it seemed to me a primitive kind of weapon. It consisted of a quantity of black fibre heavily soaked in benzine, and it had covered the road and houses with black greasy smears.

From that time onwards, for many weeks,

Padua was raided with considerable regularity. It only recovered its tranquillity when the German bombing squadron departed for the French front, where, to the great joy of the Italians, it was almost entirely wiped out by British airmen.

The Italian anti-aircraft guns were far from effective, though it must be said that the shelling of aeroplanes is usually an ineffective pastime. The Germans dropped their bombs about the town exactly where they pleased, and at the beginning of January, both the British and the French General Headquarters were moved out of the town. It had been rumoured in Italy that the art treasures of Padua were in danger owing to the presence of British and French troops in the town. It was argued that the enemy had never seriously bombed Padua while it was occupied by Italian troops, and German propaganda made the most of this fact. But of course, as stated, the establishment of three General Headquarters in one small town was a temptation to the enemy which he could not be expected to resist.

One morning after a big raid the order went out that no one in khaki was to be in Padua after 7 p.m. unless on special duty, and the General



“MANY-DOMED PADUA”

For miles and miles round Padua the country is flat as a pancake, with a near horizon of pollarded trees festooned with vines. But the skyline of Padua's towers and domes adds constant beauty to a dull landscape.







Staff was scattered through the suburbs. It was a fortunate thing that this precaution was taken, for that very night two bombs fell on British Headquarters and another bomb burst in the garden behind French Headquarters. There would have been a long casualty list if the Staffs had still been in the town.

The Padovani endured the raid with a remarkable equanimity. For a time things were as bad as they ever were in Dunkirk, Belfort, or Nancy. The French population were more upset at being bombed than the Padovani, who behaved with a kind of stoical patience. It is true that those of the inhabitants who could, went out into the country on moonlight nights, while those who could not slept in great discomfort in the underground refuges prepared by the Municipality. Night after night they could not go to bed at all, and yet during the day they went about their affairs as usual and seemed as gay as ever.

A raid which many French veterans described as the worst raid of the war was made on the French Headquarters in the little town of Castelfranco. There all night long the Germans dropped bombs just as they pleased, killing a General, several other officers and a number of

soldiers. The General was killed as he was crossing the square, opposite the old castle. Bombs had been falling all round his headquarters, and he had just gone out to a refuge which was in the square when the bomb fell beside him.

The worst bombing suffered by the British was in Montebelluna, where the enemy used to come night after night. Montebelluna was within field-gun range of the enemy lines, but it was very ill-provided with shelters. It consists of one broad main street, and down that street the German airmen used to drop bomb after bomb. One night seven bombs were dropped in the neighbourhood of the station, two of them within a yard or two of a house in which a friend of mine was billeted. Not one of those seven bombs exploded, and the next day when the British sappers dug them up they found that none of them had a detonator in them. Such an oversight must surely have been due to the intervention of some friendly Slav employed in the aerodrome, who had chosen to forget the detonators in order to show his sympathy with Italy.

This same friend of mine lived in the worst

billet in Montebelluna, since it was next to the railway, and therefore an obvious target. One night a convoy of lorries was caught by the enemy waiting at this crossing and it was bombed with vigour. My friend was blown across his room into his fireplace, and when he came out of his house he found a sergeant lying in the road dead with no apparent wound. He brought him in and found that his death had been caused by a splinter scarcely larger than a pin's-head which had been driven into his heart. The bombs used by the enemy on that occasion burst into the smallest fragments, and the lorries in the neighbourhood looked as if they had been fired at by shot guns.

The German attempt to terrorise the Italians behind the line proved unavailing. In the past the Italians on the Lombard and Venetian Plain had been well accustomed to battle, murder and to sudden death, and they had no intention of throwing up the sponge on account of a few air-raids.

Meantime, from a military point of view, we held complete mastery of the air. The Germans might bomb open towns at night and make life unpleasant in the cantonments behind the lines,

but in the daytime the Austrians scarcely dared show themselves at all. The British airmen had established complete supremacy over the enemy, and the Italians followed their example. In daylight we were lords of the air, and when the Germans went away to the March offensive on the French front the enemy aircraft ceased to trouble us.

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE ITALIAN ACHIEVEMENT.

No idea can be formed of the Italian achievement without consideration of the material difficulties with which Italy had to contend. In France and Great Britain there has been a tendency to ignore those difficulties, thereby minimising a very remarkable accomplishment. Italy is a country without minerals and without coal. All modern warfare turns on coal and steel, and without artillery and ammunition in such quantities as the world has never conceived before a nation has no chance of success. Every ton of coal and every ton of steel used by Italy had to be bought in one form or another from foreign countries. The result was that the exchange rose terribly against Italy and she had to pay for her armaments nearly double what France and England were paying.

The Italian Government had great difficulties

to face, and in the unprecedented circumstances resulting from the war it found itself like other allied Governments more or less at the mercy of unscrupulous speculators. Just before the end of the war the Italians discovered that they were entirely without a rare metal which is required for manufacturing important forms of steel. The Italian Authorities seem to have been rather vague as to the purposes and use of this metal, but they gave an order for a certain quantity to one of their agents. This agent applied to England, only to discover that the rare metal in question had been commandeered by the Government and that none could be spared for Italy. He then sent an application to the United States. He adopted the simple method of looking up in a directory the name of a firm which dealt in rare metals. As a matter of fact it merely dealt in samples.

This firm undertook to supply the Italian Government with a small quantity of the metal at something more than twice the price fixed for it by the British Government. The agent added his commission, and a heavy one at that, and the metal was purchased by the Italian Government. In due course of time it arrived



in Italy, and then the authorities suddenly discovered that they had no plant for dealing with it, so it was laid aside to await further developments. Eventually the necessary plant was constructed, and the engineers in charge of the business were told that they must use up this stock of metal before procuring any other. It need scarcely be said that they found it was of very inferior quality, mixed with all sorts of impurities, and it cost them endless pains and trouble to use the metal at all.

This is only a single instance of the myriad difficulties with which the Italians had to contend. There was never any unity of idea and policy between Great Britain, France and Italy. The unity of command was with great difficulty achieved on the French front, but the Italians always stood outside it. The Allies were hard put to it themselves for metal and transport, and they accorded to Italy a very grudging assistance.

Coal became practically unobtainable, even for firms working for Government. I was assured that if it could have been obtained, 1000 lire (£40) per ton would have been cheerfully paid for anthracite. In Genoa and Milan factories

engaged in army work had to close down for two or three days a week during the critical period after Caporetto, and they would have been able to do no work at all if North Italy had not fortunately been the most highly developed country of Europe from the point of view of electric power.

Italy was saved by the "white coal" of the Alps. Before the war Italian engineers had harnessed many of the torrents that descend from the mountains, and had linked up the power thus obtained in a comprehensive system that extended from the Mediterranean to the Adriatic. Electrical power was distributed to Genoa, Turin, Milan, Brescia and other manufacturing towns of North Italy, and the factories were rationed as far as possible in accordance with the urgency of the work which they were carrying out. At the end of 1917 there was no rain or snow until very late in the year, and the result was a great shortage in the water supply. In the past such a shortage had been made up by the use of coal, but no coal was forthcoming. All that could be done was to reduce the hours of labour and wait until there was more water.

Nowhere in the world are there better equipped factories than in Milan and Turin. They



#### ON THE ADVANCE TO PORDENONE

The British cavalry reached Sacile on Oct. 30, 1918, and were followed closely by the infantry. The drawing shows how the British Army quietly "takes over" and "carries on." "Up Traffic. To Pordenone" was soon on the walls amid similar German and Austrian placards.



Maria Hilde  
1918



are splendidly provided with every modern contrivance, and their cleanliness and orderly arrangements compare very favourably with the factories of France and England. It was noticeable that Italy had certain specialities which had no counterpart in France or England. The men at the head of her bigger factories were as a rule very young, many of them only in the thirties, and these men certainly displayed the most praiseworthy energy and initiative. To give a single instance of the useful inventions which they developed one might take the system of road trains used for hauling heavy guns and ammunition up the mountain roads. The trucks, which were drawn by a single motor-tractor, were so arranged that no matter how crooked the road they always followed exactly in the wheel marks of the tractor. There might be twenty trucks coming around a hairpin bend, yet there would be no tendency for those in the rear to swing over into the ditch. The country in which Italy had to fight was so difficult that without these ingenious means of transport it is hard to see how the Italians could have survived.

When the French and British Expeditionary Forces arrived in Italy the Allies began to realise

more clearly the difficulties of the Italian Authorities. Specialists were sent from France and England to assist the Italians in forming certain industries that were necessary in war.

By mutual arrangement between the British, French and Italian governments, the great "key" industry of manufacturing alloys for high speed steels was established in Italy—a matter of serious economic importance. It meant during the War a great saving in freight, with proportionately reduced risk in the transport of a very valuable product, and it enabled the Italians to increase materially the efficiency and output of their military factories. On the other hand it marked an important step towards Italian economic liberty after the war. More than any other of the Allies Italy had been hampered by her dependence on Germany for essential commodities. Before the war the Italians imported all their high speed alloys and nearly all their high speed steel, so that when with the declaration of hostilities the normal supply abruptly ceased they were without means of multiplying the machine tools, on which in the ultimate resort the issue of modern war depends.



Great Britain and France had done their best to keep Italy supplied with the indispensable tools made of high speed steel, required for the working of the "special" steels employed in the manufacture of guns, shells, armour and the like, but the national needs of these two countries made the supply precarious. By the end of the war Italy was becoming independent of the Allies in this essential department, and now will be able to hold her own against German importation. The Entente fought for liberty both political and economic, and no better demonstration of this policy on the economic side could be given than the arrangement which put Italy in a position of self-sufficiency, so far as concerns metallurgy.

The characteristic of high speed steel is its extraordinary hardness, in virtue of which tools made from it are able to work all the other steels, including the "special" steels used for guns, armour-plate, etc. It is to the engineer what the diamond of the rock-drill is to the miner, and in these days the value of the rare metals that form its alloys is almost to be reckoned with that of precious stones. High speed steel provides the master tool which will make all other tools, and

the German had done his utmost to monopolise the manufacture of the alloys that compose it. In the long run it must be the tool-maker who wins a war. Superiority in material is essential, and can only be achieved by the continual development of the resources of the country for war and by the multiplication of the tools which convert these resources into the weapons of scientific war. Germany had before the war realised this situation and had spared no pains to develop her "key" industries to the utmost, and in particular that of high speed steel and its alloys; but there was one obstacle that no State encouragement and no organisation could overcome, and that obstacle was British sea-power.

The high speed steel industry, which is little more than ten years old, centres round the mysterious substance called Tungsten, or Wulfram. Tungsten, in its raw state, is generally of a dark brown colour and when crushed looks very much like ordinary soil. It resembles certain varieties of coal, and any layman would pass it by as of no interest unless he happened to dig up a spadeful of it, when he would be startled by its unexpected weight. It is like the magic powder in the fairy story, which,

though quite indistinguishable from the snuff in the Prince's snuff-box, converted everything it touched into precious metal. The magic of Tungsten did much to win the war for the Entente, and we had no more precious ally than this metal. Its principal deposits are in Spain, Portugal, India, Australia and America. There is no Tungsten in the Central Empires, and in face of the blockade the enemy could procure none from outside.

With their usual foresight the Germans before the war had laid up considerable stocks in their country, but by 1917 all their reserves must have been exhausted. A Tungsten expert told me that the enemy must have hoarded his Tungsten steel even more precious than his gold. He was making broken tools and using over and over again every splinter of the precious metal, but with all his care the amount of Tungsten at his disposal was a seriously diminishing quantity. The Germans had a certain decreasing number of machine tools and they had no way of replacing the inevitable wastage, so that eventually, owing to shortage of Tungsten alloy, the whole of their production of military material was bound to become less efficient. In this

connection it is interesting to note that from the month of July, 1918, onwards, the German artillery deteriorated noticeably, and the enemy found it impossible to produce such effective weapons as he had produced in the past.

Some twelve years ago Tungsten, on which the fate of empires depends, was known vaguely to certain Portuguese, who regarded it as a thoroughly despicable kind of coal, since it refused to burn and was quite unsaleable. Later, when they discovered its value, they made up for past errors by displaying great ingenuity in finding valueless substitutes, such as Turmaline, which were sufficiently like Tungsten to take in a non-expert buyer.

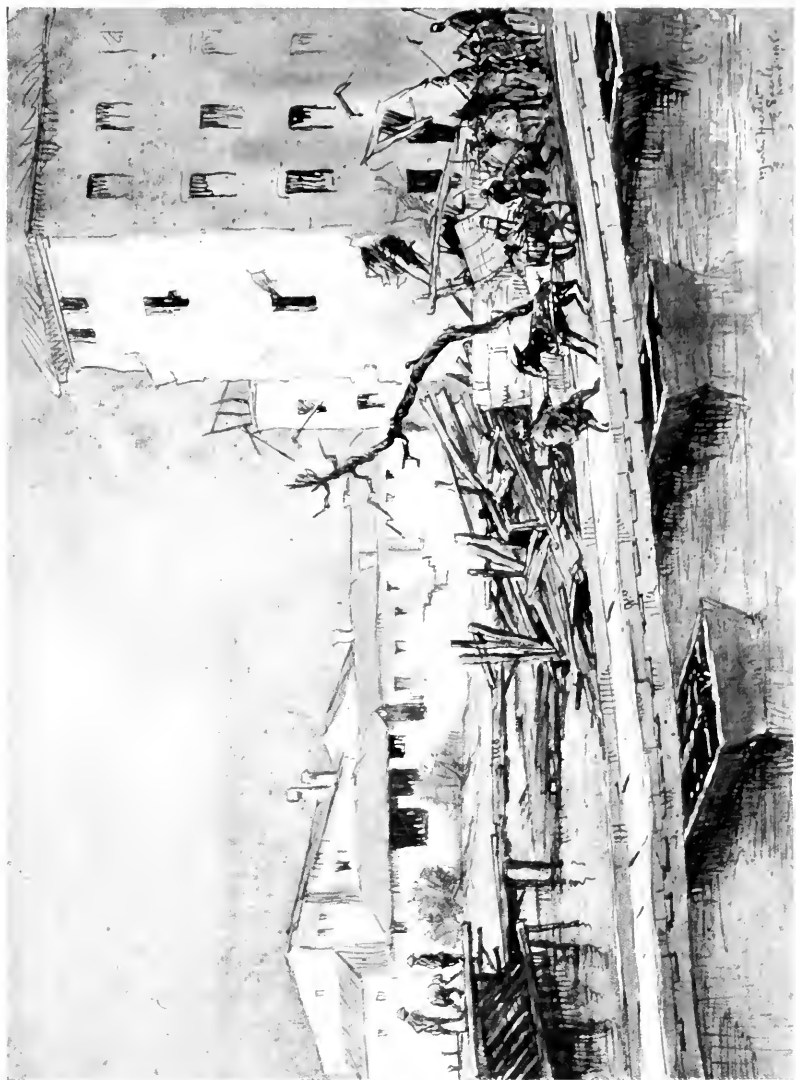
The natives of Cornwall also regarded Tungsten with suspicion and disgust. For them it was an impurity in black tin of a particularly objectionable kind, since it was difficult or impossible to remove, and its presence spoilt the tin. An ingenious magnetic separator was invented, which made it possible to get tin and Tungsten apart, and the Tungsten was thrown away as worthless, while the tin was preserved and sold. To-day an improved magnetic separator performs the same functions. It separates Tungsten and tin,



#### O.C. BRIDGES, SACILE

In the northward advance at the end of October, 1918, all the British troops and their transport crossed this pontoon bridge. At the moment when the drawing was made, "O.C. Bridges," seen on the further bridge, had temporarily surrendered his title to an Italian donkey, which effectively blocked all traffic.

The new bridge was completed by the R.E. and carrying heavy traffic within forty-eight hours after the drawing was made.







but now the tin is a mere impurity in Tungsten. The despised Tungsten has become a rare and precious metal, while the tin, unless it is obtained in large quantities, is thrown away.

Tungsten in its raw condition is of no use to the steel-maker. The manufacture of high speed steel is a far more complicated matter than the mere mixing of steel and Tungsten. The reduction of Tungsten to a form in which it will mix with the steel and bestow on it its unequalled hardness is the key to the whole metallurgical industry. The delicate chemical processes by which the alloy called Ferro-tungsten is produced are the result of long and difficult experiments, and their secrets are most carefully guarded. By the new arrangement Italy was able to profit by the experience of the British experts in this industry.

To provide a country with the plant necessary to produce the high speed steel that will ensure its economic independence requires no enormous factory. Only a small plant is needed, provided that it is backed by the invaluable assets of skill and scientific knowledge. In the works which were erected to provide Italy with Ferro-tungsten, science had almost eliminated the expense of

coal and electrical power, an invaluable economy in time of war. Unscientifically expressed the fuel used was aluminium. For the production of the alloy stupendous temperatures are needed, and they were obtained by the alumino-thermic method, which, though used in Germany, has been even more highly developed by British industry.

To the unscientific mind the process seems a miracle. A great iron bucket, lined with refractory earth and filled nearly to the brim with tungsten and other metals is wheeled into a furnace. In the furnace there is no fuel of any kind, and all the potential heat is contained in the bucket in the shape of shreds of aluminium. On the top of the bucket is placed a small paper-bag containing a mysterious powder. The privileged visitor is then invited to put a match to the paper-bag and set fire to the metals in the bucket. It would be hard to imagine anything less inflammable in appearance. The bucket seems to be full of earth with a sprinkling of aluminium, and one would suppose that it would be as easy to set an ordinary road on fire with a cigarette end.

The match applied, the paper-bag begins to

burn ; when the flame reaches the powder there is a bright white flame, which suddenly, as if by magic, descends and seizes the metals beneath. Almost simultaneously the whole surface of the bucket becomes a white seething mass of molten metal ; scorching heat and blinding yellow smoke pour out of it, and the furnace doors are hurriedly closed. The aluminium, owing to its violent reaction with certain oxides to form alumina, gives rise to temperatures far exceeding those of the hottest furnace, and the Tungsten and the other component metals of the alloy boil and bubble away merrily, as if they were a brew of soup. No cook, however, ever had so precious a dish to cook, and it may be doubted if ever a Cordon Bleu took more delicate pains in mixing the ingredients than the expert in charge took in forming and adjusting the composition of the infernal brew. The Tungsten alloy was being made by the same process that Nature used to produce the metals when the world was in course of formation. The incendiary bombs used by Zeppelins and other aircraft obtain their results by the same principle.

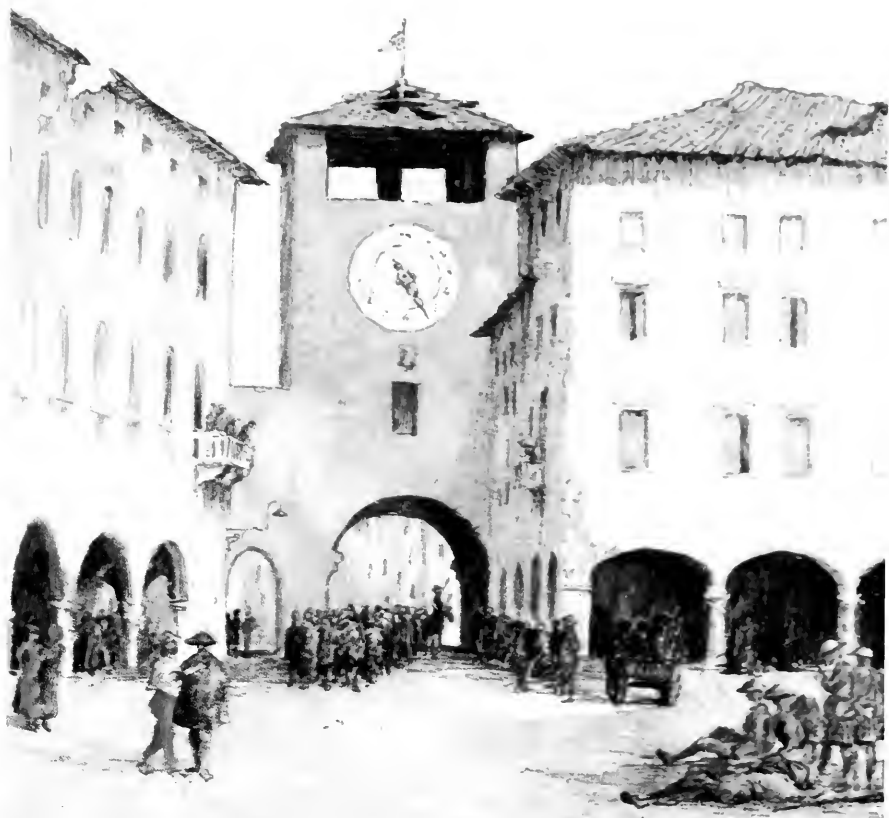
There is nothing showy in the Tungsten Treasure House : a mere cellar packed with dirty

sacks that might be full of coal or sand compares poorly with the treasure chambers of the Arabian Nights. An open sack shows no gleaming grains of gold dust or sparkling precious stones, but merely brown soil, such as one might find in any sand-bag in the trenches. Yet for that brown soil Germany would gladly have paid fabulous sums. For the Entente its value was not to be reckoned in gold. Under a system which was suggested to the other Governments of the Entente by Great Britain, after consultation with the chiefs of the metal industry, the greater part of the Tungsten supply of the world was controlled by the Allied powers. In this way the Tungsten market was saved to a great extent from the wild speculation which at one time caused violent fluctuations in price, and great economy was effected.



#### THE PIAZZA, SACILE

It was through Sacile that the British troops advanced northwards after crossing the Piave. After the Armistice on Nov. 4, 1919, when this drawing was made, tens of thousands of Austrian prisoners, broken and ragged, were brought back through the town.



Markt-gebäude  
Saarbrücken 1898.





## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE VICTORY OFFENSIVE.

FROM June to September, 1918, there was calm on the Italian front. The Italians were preparing for action and were watching events on the French front, ready to take advantage of any situation that might arise. The Italians had two courses open to them, either to launch a partial offensive aiming at definite gains of territory and positions, or to throw the whole weight of all their forces into the scales and to risk everything on a single blow. The second alternative could only be adopted if there was a very definite idea that success would lead to the complete collapse of the enemy. Such a success was only to be hoped for if the German line in France was threatening downfall.

After the French counter-offensive in July, the position of the Central Empires was clearly menaced and the Italian High Command felt

the moment was approaching to deal Austria a decisive blow. At the same time, however, they were determined to run no unnecessary risks and only to strike at the propitious moment.

The June battle had cost the Italians 90,000 men, and during the following months the Comando Supremo was mainly occupied in concentrating all its resources in man-power. About the month of July preparations began for a limited offensive on the Asiago Plateau. This operation could have been carried out even if the Allied success in France had not achieved complete success. It was capable of development and eventually became only a minor part of the general large scale offensive that was carried out along the whole front from the mountains to the sea.

In the middle of September the collapse of Bulgaria showed that the block of the Central Empires was crumbling and the Italian High Command made ready to administer the coup de grâce to Austria-Hungary, since it was clear that the might of Germany was on the point of collapse.

Briefly stated, the Italian intention in this general offensive was to break through the Piave on a wide front, thus cutting the Austrian army

into two parts, and then by an enveloping action up the mountain valleys towards the north to bring about the collapse of the whole line.

To accomplish this object it was necessary to reach the town of Vittorio Veneto, which lies some twelve miles from the Piave, just where the foot-hills of the Alps come down into the plain. It was the goal of the first stage of the action and, if it were reached, the line of communications of the 6th Austrian army would be cut. The 5th Austrian army, which extended to the sea, would be completely severed from the rest of the force and a road would be opened towards the rear of the enemy mountain positions in the Trentino. The 6th Austrian army held the sector from Alano to Ponte della Priula, and its lines of communication were peculiarly exposed to attack as they ran along its left flank from Vittorio to Conegliano and Sacile. If the Italians could reach Vittorio it was clear that a general retreat of the Austrian army would become necessary. Such a retreat was necessarily hazardous since mountainous country gave little opportunity for a safe withdrawal of so large a force. From the point of view of the mountains between the Adige and the Piave, the key position

was Feltre, which lies in the valley immediately behind Grappa. Once at Vittorio the Italians could advance on Feltre from the rear of the mountains that form the Grappa group. Moreover, they could occupy the Belluno Valley, which was the main line of retreat for the Austrian armies which constituted the Belluno group.

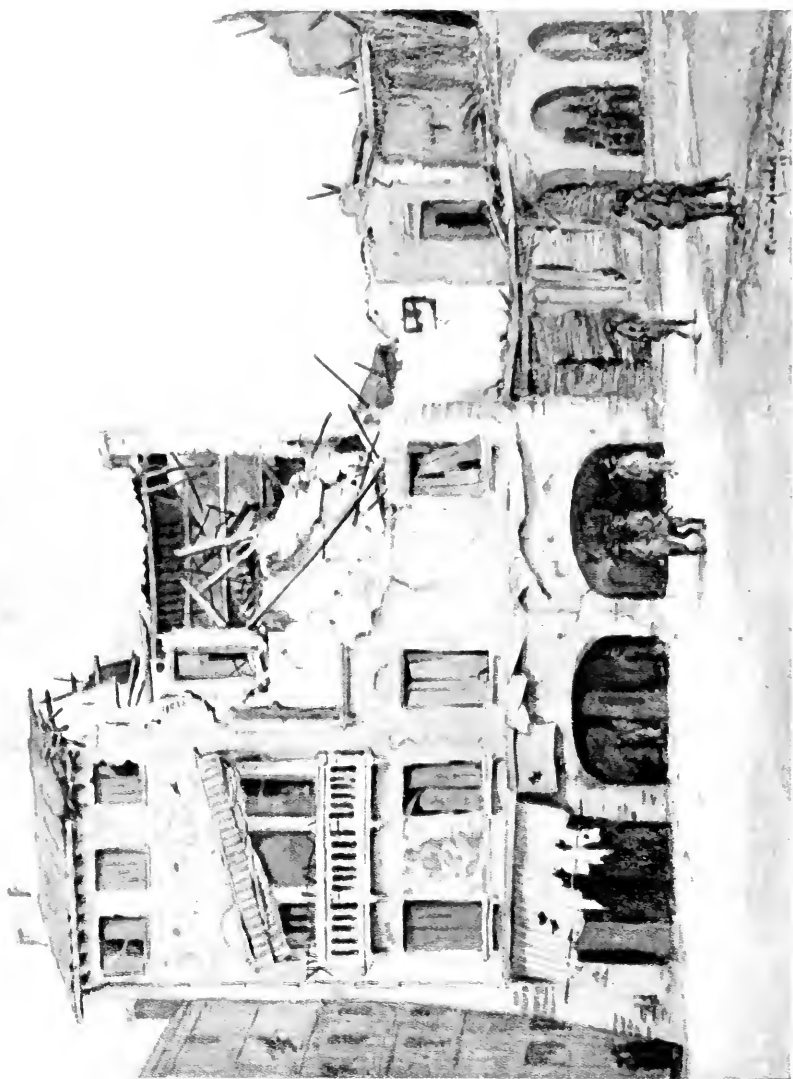
Immediately after the Austrian offensive in June there was much talk of an Italian offensive, and at that time the general opinion was that the only possible plan of attack consisted in the occupation of the upper valley of the Piave. It was pointed out that the Austrians could only be driven from these mountain positions, which they held in close proximity to the plain, by turning the mountain front along the Piave. It was this manoeuvre which was adopted for the final offensive, and events proved that its conception was sound.

There were obvious difficulties to be faced. The Piave was a serious obstacle. The whole history of the war has shown the importance of rivers as a barrier. The Marne, the Aisne and the Meuse have all played their part in the operations in France, and experience has shown that a river front can only be broken through after careful



BOMBED HOUSES IN THE PIAZZA  
S. LEONARDO, TREVISO

Treviso, which was within a few miles of the front line on the Piave, was badly damaged by shell and aircraft bombs.







and scientific artillery preparation. When the Piave was low, it was a far less formidable obstacle than the French rivers mentioned above. But fed by the mountains, it was a treacherous stream that might suddenly at the critical moment of an assault become wider, deeper and more violent than any of the rivers of the French front. The Austrians in June had crossed it without difficulty, only to discover that it was a death-trap. With their bridges swept away, disaster stared them in the face and they were fortunate to have extricated themselves as cheaply as they did.

In June the enemy, by his vigorous attacks in the mountains, had tried to draw off reserves from the Piave, but his plans were too well-known to the Allies for the feint to succeed. The Italians adopted the same plan to divert Austrian attention from their main attack, and their effort proved successful. The possibility of a flood of the Piave had been taken into account and in readiness for all emergencies, the Italian High Command had collected all the material necessary for a large number of bridges. It was hoped that even in the worst conditions, the considerable weight of artillery concentrated on the

Italian bank would make it possible for the infantry to hold the captured bridge-heads on the further bank against all attacks.

The enemy had on the whole front from the Stelvio to the sea  $63\frac{1}{2}$  divisions. On the Italian side there were 51 Italian divisions, 3 British, 2 French, 1 Czecho-Slovak infantry division and 1 American infantry regiment. The Italians had considerable superiority in artillery. They had concentrated 4750 weapons of all calibres and 5,700,000 rounds of ammunition, or eight days' supply, had been collected along the front of attack. In the first phase of the action 22 divisions were employed and of these 2 were British and 1 was French. The 4th army, commanded by the Lieut.-General Giardino, held the front from Valstagna to Fener; the 12th army, commanded by General Graziani of the French army, from Fener to the Montello; the 8th army under Lieut.-General Caviglia, held the Montello; and the 10th army, commanded by General the Earl of Cavan, occupied the Piave bank in advance of Treviso. Twenty divisions, including four cavalry divisions were held in reserve. The duty of Lord Cavan's army in the Italian plan was to force the crossing of



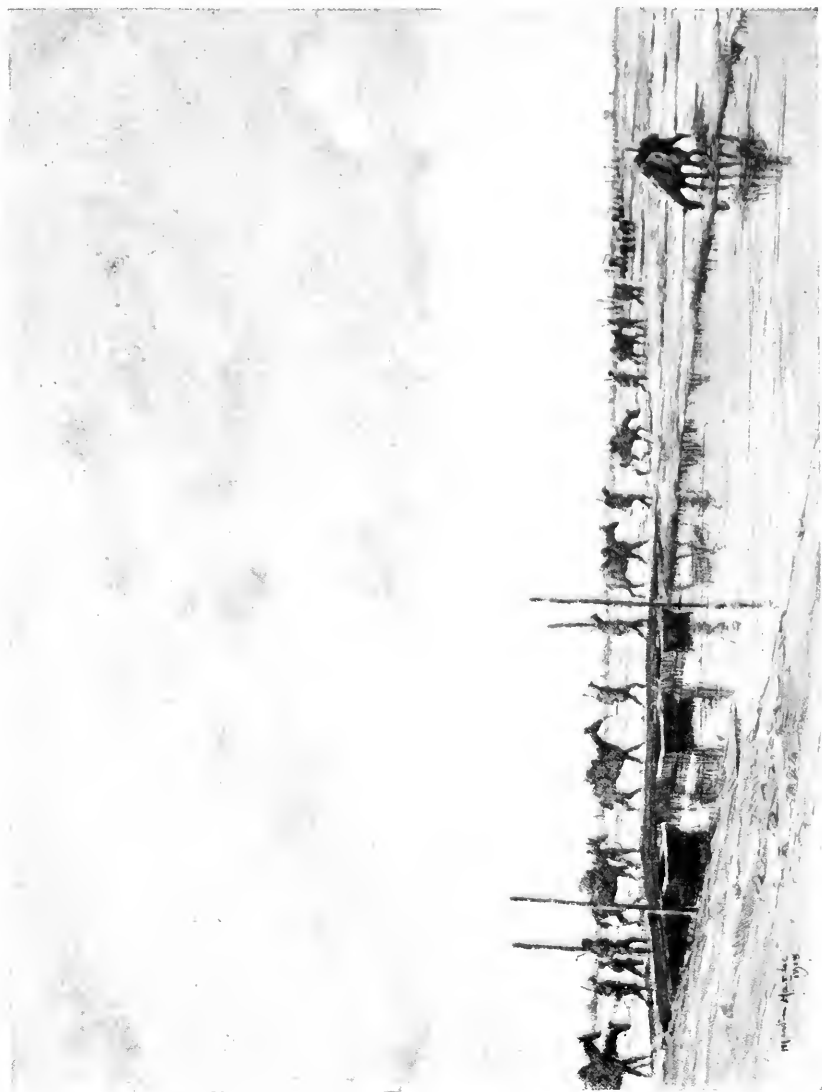
ADVANCE OF THE CAVALRY ACROSS THE  
PIAVE

The pontoon bridging of the Piave was carried out under very difficult conditions, for the currents in the many channels were so strong that any breakage of a bridge due to bomb or shell generally resulted in the whole bridge being swept away. (See pp. 195-197.)

*Extract from 'O' Summary, Nov. 2, 1918*

2203. The following names are allotted to Bridges in the order named coming down the stream :

The two at Palazzon—VESTA and TILLEY. The two at Salettuo crossing to Grave di Papadopoli HARRY and TATE.





the Piave and then form a defensive flank, covering the advance of the 8th army on the left of Vittorio. The success of the whole operation turned on this manoeuvre, and it was the glory of the British divisions that they succeeded in driving a wedge into the enemy front, which split the Austrian army into two parts. Their task was very difficult. First they established themselves on the islands in the river and enabled the Italian divisions to cross, and then they fought their way on to the Livenza, overcoming all opposition. When their work was accomplished, the battle was won.

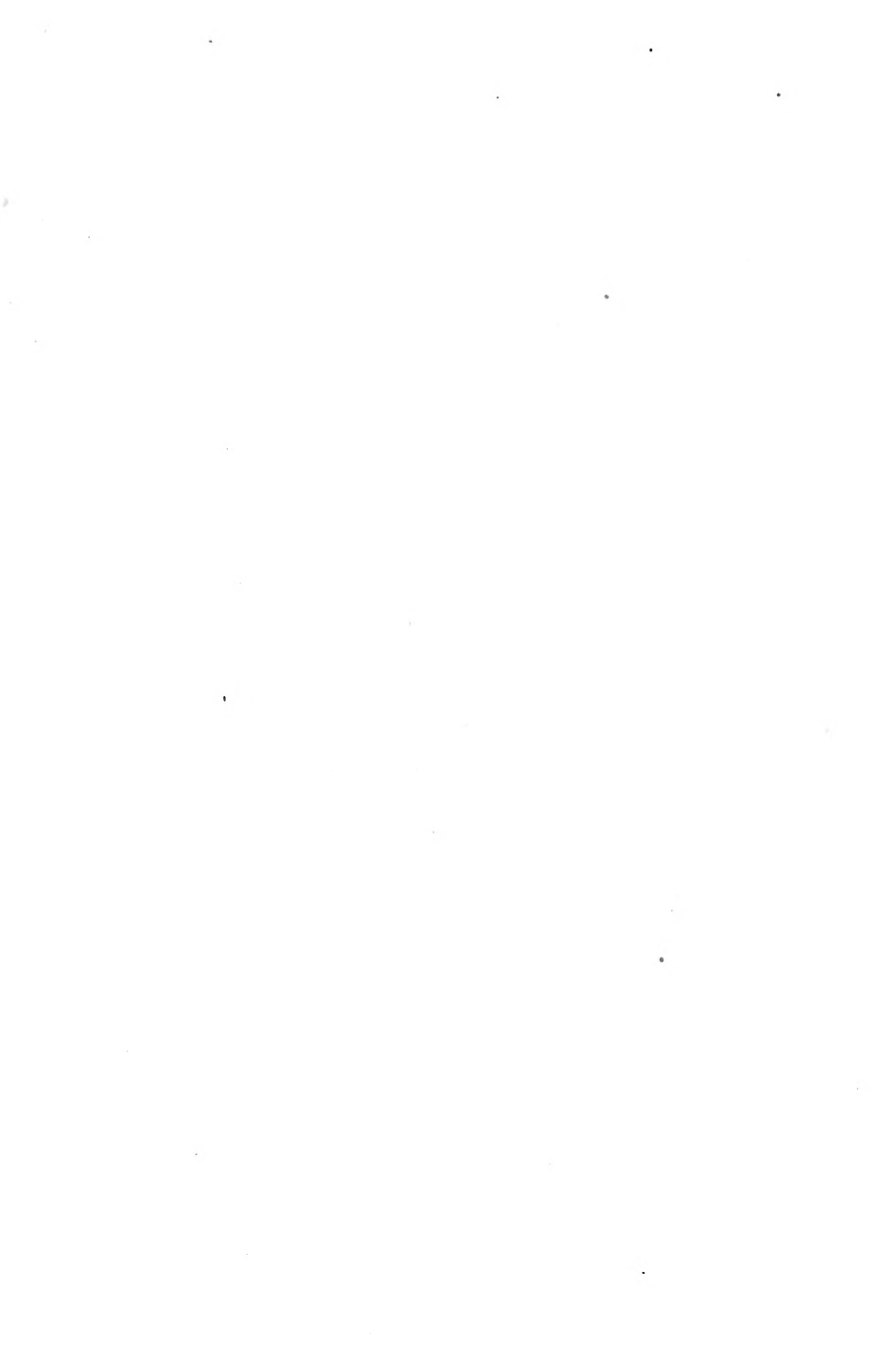
The final battle began on October 24th, and the blow was struck by the 4th Italian army in the Grappa area. This attack was intended to deceive the enemy, and it served its purpose as a diversion. At first no definite results were achieved. Mountain positions were taken and lost and retaken, and the enemy showed that at this point along the front he was prepared to hold his ground. There had been a rise in the Piave during the preceding day and for that reason the attack at this point was postponed. Nevertheless the British succeeded in establishing themselves on the islands in the Piave, called the

Grave di Papadopoli, and, in spite of desperate resistance, consolidated their positions.

On October 21st, the 14th British Corps had taken over the Piave front. The enemy was kept unaware of the presence of British troops. All men visible to the enemy were ordered to wear Italian uniform and not a shot was fired by a British gun before the general bombardment. On the night of October 23rd, though the river was in full flood, two British battalions crossed the main Piave channel, and, surprising the Austrian garrison, occupied the northern half of the island. At this point the Piave was about a mile and a half broad. It consisted of numerous channels dotted with islands. The attacking troops had been transported in small flat-bottomed boats. On the night of October 25th, the whole island of Grave di Papadopoli was captured by a British and Italian division. This successful operation carried our men across the main channel of the Piave and enabled them to begin building their bridges and preparing for the main assault.

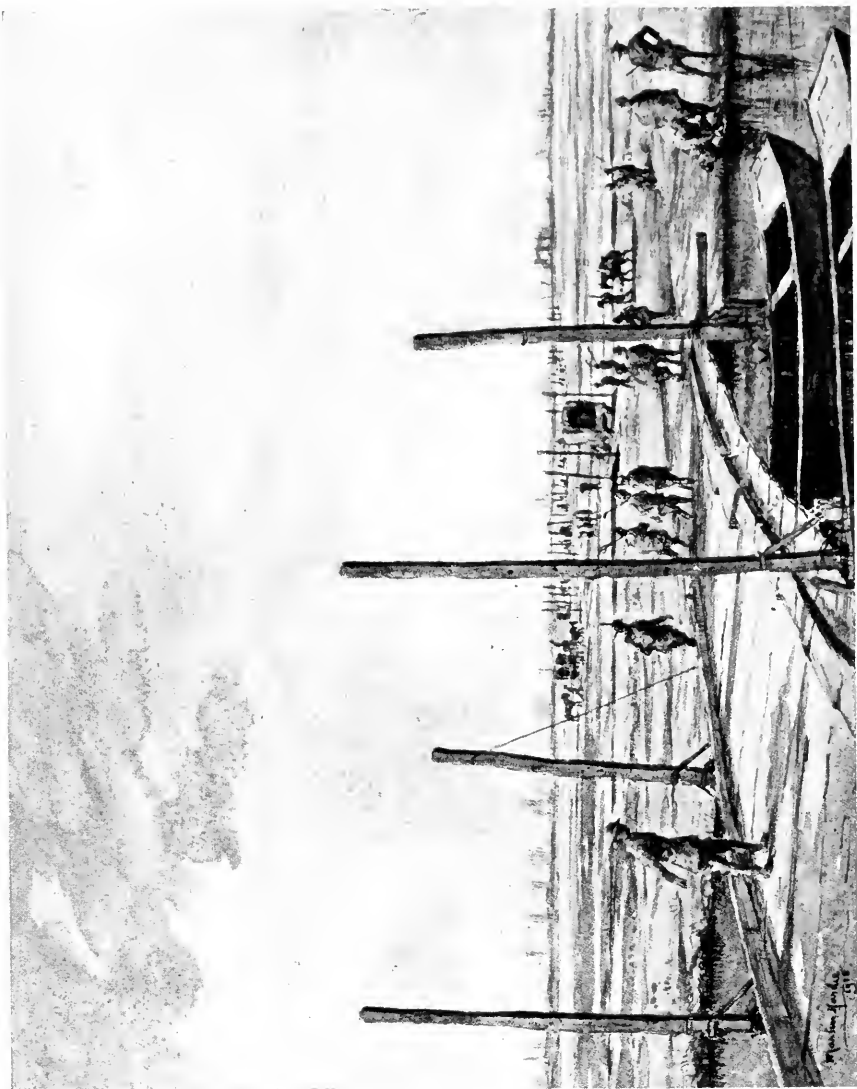
On the evening of the 26th, weather conditions improved and the work of bridging the Piave began. The Italian sappers worked





#### PONTOON TRAFFIC ON THE PIAVE

The Piave, after it leaves the mountains, runs down to the sea through a plain as flat as the plains of Flanders. Its wide bed of shingle is intersected by channels, each of which had to be spanned by pontoon bridges for the general advance. The ruined building on the far bank was in the British front line at the time of the advance. (See pp. 195-197.)





admirably and accomplished their difficult task under heavy fire. Six bridges were completed, one near Pederobba, two along the Montello and three at the Grave di Papadopoli. The enemy's lines were rushed at day-light and three large bridge lines were formed, one near Valdobbiadene, the second in the Sernaglia Plain, and the third opposite the Grave di Papadopoli in the Cimadolmo Plain.

The bombardment of the hostile positions began at 11.30 p.m. on the night of October 26th, and at 6.45 on the following morning, the 10th army opened its attack against the enemy defences east of the river. The Austrians offered considerable resistance in their front line, but the vigour of the assault soon overwhelmed the defenders. By the night of the 27th, a large bridge-head was securely held and the bridging of the Piave was carried on despite the efforts of hostile airmen. The current was so strong that any breakage of a bridge due to a bomb or shell generally resulted in the whole bridge being swept away.

The preliminary operation had been successful, but there was still one flaw. The 8th Italian Corps had been unable to bridge the river between Falze and Nervesa, so that there was a wide gap

on the further bank between the 8th and the 10th armies. On the 29th, however, the 8th Corps, assisted by the troops which had already crossed the river, succeeded in getting a bridge across and drove the enemy from his positions on the further bank.

On the same day the 10th army reached the Monticano river. It was here that the enemy offered his last serious resistance. The operations of the 10th army were largely assisted by the dash of the British 14th Corps mounted troops, which had secured the bridge over the Monticano between Vazzola and Cimetta. The enemy had mined this bridge, but it was captured before they could blow it up.

The Austrian position was already almost hopeless. A wedge had been driven into his line which threatened to cut his armies in the plain into two parts. Defeat was rapidly becoming a rout. On the 30th, the Italian advance continued and a definite break was made in the enemy's line. A cavalry division dashed forward through the gap making for the Livenza and the Tagliamento.

The action was now extended southwards towards Venice and the 3rd Italian army crossed



#### BRIDGE OVER THE MONTICANO

This bridge was mined by the enemy, but captured before they could blow it up. It was here that the retreating enemy offered his last and most serious resistance, and the British 14th Corps mounted troops did brilliant service. The small dug-outs on both sides of the sloping banks show that, owing to the serious check, our troops had to dig themselves in. (See p. 198.)

An old Italian woman is said to have watched the whole of the fighting from the house on the left.







the Piave and pursued the retreating enemy. More important was the action further north on the border of the mountains; here the Italians were working their way up the Piave Valley, and were beginning to threaten Feltre. The enemy command still seemed in doubt as to the real Italian objective. The attacks on Grappa had drawn the bulk of his reserves in that direction, while the success of the 10th army in crossing the Piave had attracted to its sector the enemy reserves available in the Plain. In fact, the Austrian reserves were now exactly where the Italians wanted them. They were concentrated behind an assault that was a diversion, while in the Plain, they were ready to oppose, not the 12th army, which was to be the main striking force, but the 10th army, which was intended to form a defensive flank to the main operation.

On the 30th, the 12th army had forced the Quero defile, and advancing in the direction of Feltre, were already threatening to take the Grappa positions in the rear. Perforce the enemy fell back from Grappa fighting a rear-guard action with the 4th Italian army, which pressed hard on its heels. At 5.30 on the 31st, the Italians entered Feltre.

The Austrian front had been broken and from this time forward the enemy made no really serious attempt at resistance. Even before the general offensive a great part of the Austrian army, ill-fed and ill-equipped, had been verging on utter disorganisation and the vigorous spear-thrust, in which two British divisions had acted as the spear point driven into the enemy line, had accomplished its purpose.

The Austrians were beaten and the only remaining question was how to make the most of this great success. The Italian cavalry pressed hard on the heels of the routed foe, who was given no opportunity of re-constituting his units or organising a defensive position. Hundreds of thousands of prisoners were captured and an enormous booty, and finally when the Austrian army had for all practical purposes been annihilated the victorious Italian High Command granted an armistice which came into force at 3.0 p.m. on November 4th, 1918.

United Italy had wiped out the reproach of Caporetto and was in a position to demand from her Allies that her frontiers should be extended even beyond those limits which had been the wildest dream of Cavour and Garibaldi.

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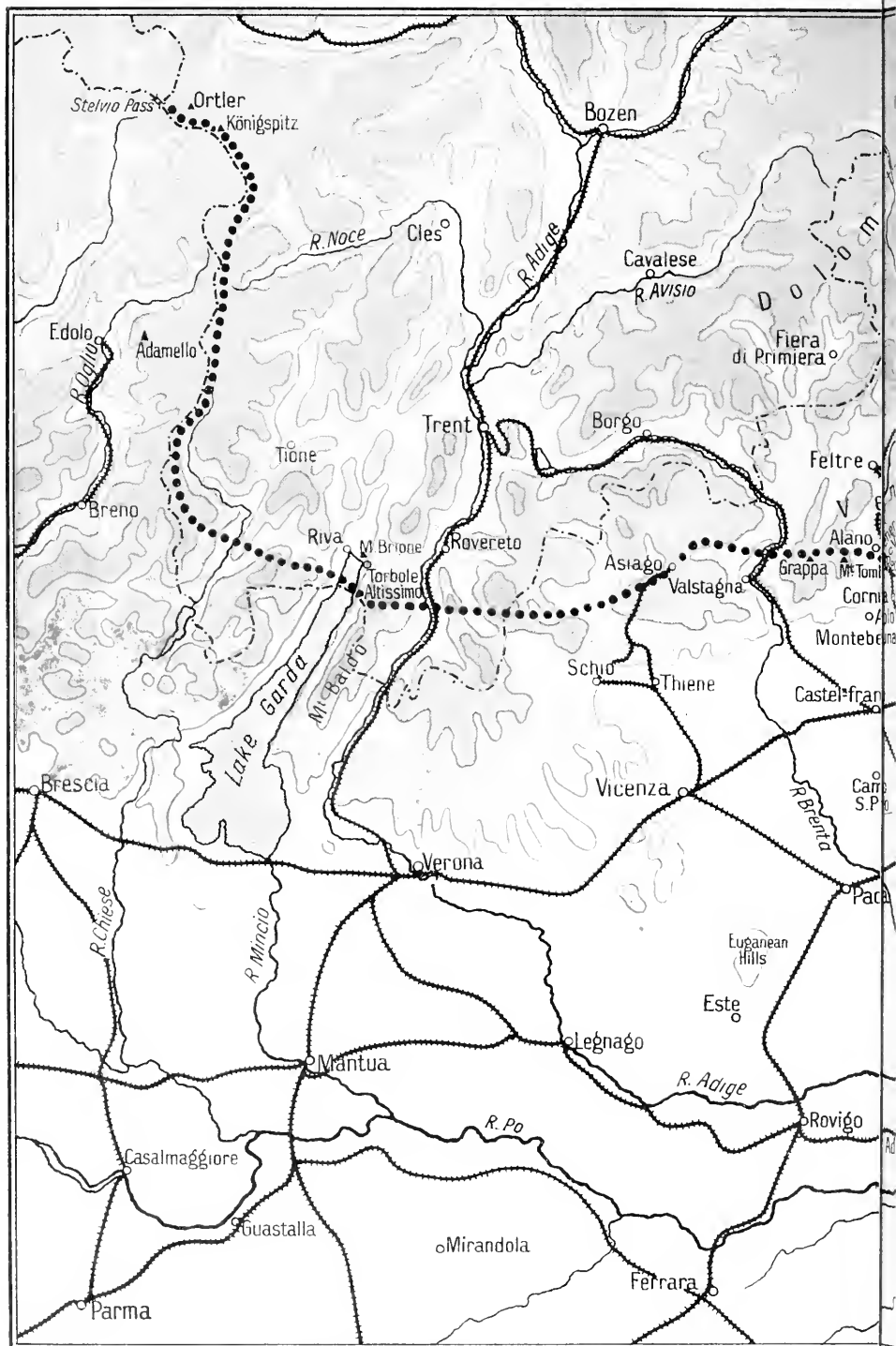
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